Tuesday
1 December 2020

Volume 685
No. 144

HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 1 December 2020

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House of Commons

Tuesday 1 December 2020

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker *in the Chair*]

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

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

Oral Answers to Questions

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—

Universal Basic Income

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): Whether he has had discussions with Cabinet colleagues on the potential merits of introducing a universal basic income to support economic recovery following the covid-19 outbreak. [909584]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Steve Barclay): We have supported those on the lowest incomes throughout this crisis by investing more than £7 billion in the welfare system, and we are focused on helping people to get into work by making up to £30 billion available through our plans for jobs.

Ronnie Cowan [V]: Councils throughout England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland have asked for support to run basic-income pilots, designed to increase our knowledge of the pros and cons of basic income. Five hundred and twenty elected politicians from across the UK sent a letter to the Chancellor on this subject and got a frankly derisory response. Does the Chancellor honestly believe that he knows everything there is to know about a basic income and would not learn from such pilots? If he does not, will he back the basic-income pilots and let us learn together and make evidence-based policy?

Steve Barclay: I am happy to learn from the 2017 Work and Pensions Committee report that said it was

"difficult to see how"—

a universal basic income—

"would substantially alleviate poverty",

or from the OECD, which said that a universal basic income could "increase poverty" and negatively affect the poorest. If the hon. Gentleman is putting forward this proposal, he should set out what the specific amount is. I note that to date the SNP has refused to do that.

Ineligibility for Covid-19 Financial Support

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): What representations he has received from organisations representing people who are ineligible for covid-19 financial support schemes; and if he will make a statement. [909585]

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): What representations he has received from organisations representing people who are ineligible for covid-19 financial support schemes; and if he will make a statement. [909587]

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): What representations he has received from organisations representing people who are ineligible for covid-19 financial support schemes; and if he will make a statement. [909606]

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): What representations he has received from organisations representing people who are ineligible for covid-19 financial support schemes; and if he will make a statement. [909613]

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): What representations he has received from organisations representing people who are ineligible for covid-19 financial support schemes; and if he will make a statement. [909616]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rishi Sunak): Before I start, I know that Members from around the House will join me in commemorating World AIDS Day and the many organisations that make this day happen. As we remember those we have lost to HIV and AIDS, we also remind ourselves of the need for further action. I am proud that this Conservative Government's policy is to end new HIV transmission by 2030—a commitment reaffirmed today at the launch of the HIV commission.

Throughout this crisis, the Government's economic priority has been to protect jobs, livelihoods, businesses and public services, and we have spent more than £280 billion in doing so.

Jessica Morden [V]: Given that the Chancellor has accepted that the job retention scheme and the self-employment income support scheme need to be in place until March, does he think it is right that those who have fallen through the gaps in those schemes—highlighted by the Federation of Small Businesses—will have been without support for an entire year by then? Why have Ministers not had the decency to meet groups such as ExcludedUK?

Rishi Sunak: My right hon. Friend the Financial Secretary is meeting that group and other Members, and I and other members of my team have met various representatives of the self-employed and other employed people who would like to make representations. It is fair to say that I do not agree with the idea that those people have been excluded: the Government have provided support in many different ways to many people in different circumstances. We remain committed to that support throughout this crisis.

Chris Elmore: Surely the Chancellor can understand that these people do not have any money—they have not benefited from the Government schemes that Members from all parties welcome. How can it be that the Musicians'

Union, ExcludedUK, the FSB and various other organisations and trade unions can be wrong, and that the people who have not benefited from the schemes can be wrong, and the Chancellor can be right? Why does he not accept that he has made a mistake and introduce additional funding to support those people who have been excluded from the schemes?

Rishi Sunak: I am not making the point that every single person can access every single scheme that the Government have put in place. That is not what I am saying; everyone will have different circumstances. What I am saying is that across the suite there is a range of support—a sum total of £280 billion-worth—designed to protect businesses, the employed, the self-employed and public services. Indeed, councils have been given large amounts of funding—billions of pounds—to help those in their communities who need it most, and they are well placed to make those decisions.

Paul Blomfield [V]: In the summer, one of my constituents opened a new bar in a previously thriving area, but she shut it on 23 October as we went into tier 3. She paid her workers for that week, but she could not get furlough support until 1 November because, as hers was a new business, her staff were not eligible for registration with the previous scheme. She is just one of many who the Chancellor will know have fallen through the gaps in his support schemes. Will he recognise the problem, act to close the loopholes and provide the support that is needed, particularly in the hospitality sector and its supply chain?

Rishi Sunak: The hon. Gentleman mentioned support for the hospitality sector and bars; he will of course know that support has been provided through initiatives such as the business rates holiday, which I am sure his constituent benefited from for this entire year up until the point she was struggling, as well as the cash grants for businesses earlier in the crisis, the VAT discount, eat out to help out and the further support provided to local authorities to support the supply chain. There is a significant amount of resource to help businesses like that of the hon. Gentleman's constituent, which I know have had an extremely difficult time.

Afzal Khan [V]: I was recently contacted by David and Alice, a couple with four young children. They are both directors of Around the Box Limited, but have seen their income slashed this year as a result of the pandemic. Around the Box sells boxes of puzzles and games to encourage families to laugh and connect. I trust the Chancellor will agree that such companies, which bring joy to families in times of real hardship, should be protected. Why, therefore, have my constituents, David and Alice, along with millions of people like them, been excluded from all Government support and left to fend for themselves?

Rishi Sunak: I feel very bad for David and Alice with the difficult situation that they are facing. However, I am sure that their small business, like a million other small companies across the country, has been able to benefit, I hope, from the bounce back loan programme, one of the most successful small business loan programmes that we have seen throughout this crisis. It has provided tens of billions of pounds to a million small and medium-sized businesses—up to £50,000—to help exactly those companies to get through this difficult time.

Rachel Hopkins: While the Government have provided support for creative institutions through the culture recovery fund, they are running the risk of losing our world-renowned elite west end musicians who are excluded from financial support due to being freelancers or limited companies. We risk losing these elite skills altogether and damage to the industry would have a negative impact on the ability of young musicians from working-class towns such as Luton to pursue a career in music.

Considering the sector provides more than £5 billion to our economy, can the Chancellor update the House on what barriers remain to getting support to musicians?

Rishi Sunak: There is no barrier to support for anyone wishing to access any of the various things that we have put in place. I am glad that the hon. Lady mentioned the culture recovery fund. At £1.5 billion, it is something that I do not believe any other country has done at such a scale, coupled to which is our further support for the creative arts and the film and TV production industry, which my right hon. Friend the Financial Secretary to the Treasury will be talking about later. We agree that this is an important sector and we want to ensure that it can get back to work.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I would never accuse the Chancellor of misleading the House, but he certainly seems to have misled "Good Morning Britain" when he told viewers that he had spoken to, and been back and forth with, representatives of excluded groups. Those groups are clear that he has not. Will he apologise for the oversight, and make amends by meeting MPs and representatives of all groups that have been denied financial support?

Rishi Sunak: I know that my right hon. Friend the Financial Secretary to the Treasury is meeting with that particular group. In that interview, I was making a general point about the fact that I and my team had met with various representatives of those who are self-employed. It is something that we did right at the beginning of this crisis as we looked to design the self-employment scheme and we have continued to do it throughout.

Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): We all understand that it was hard back in March to get every detail right on Government support schemes, but nine months on, why does the Chancellor still have absolutely nothing new to say to those millions of people right across our country who have been shut out from support since the beginning?

Rishi Sunak: Perhaps the hon. Lady could let me know whether she thinks that it is right to target support on those who are majority self-employed. She refers to millions of people, but, as I have explained from this Dispatch Box, 1.5 million of the 5 million people who file self-employed tax returns are not majority self-employed; they earn the majority of their income from things such as employment, which means that they can access, for example, the furlough scheme. That was a decision that was made because we are targeting support in a certain way and we do not know what individuals are doing.

By the way, the principle of our decision was supported by every organisation that I spoke to as we designed the scheme. Indeed, they were all supportive of a much higher threshold—a less generous threshold—than the one that we ultimately used, which was a majority of 50%. They were all supportive of something higher—60%. Rest assured, Mr Speaker, that those who are in that category have median self-employment earnings of between £2,000 and £3,000; it is not the primary source of their income. At that level, all the various other things that we have done will be of some help to them.

Fiscal Policy: Household Income (Scotland)

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with his Scottish counterpart on the effect of his Department's fiscal policy on household income in Scotland. [909586]

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with his Scottish counterpart on the effect of his Department's fiscal policy on household income in Scotland. [909590]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Steve Barclay): This year, the Government have put in place an unprecedented package of support to protect incomes and jobs right across the UK. Analysis published earlier this year shows that our interventions significantly protected people's incomes, with the least well-off in society supported the most.

Owen Thompson: How are those who have been excluded from support so far seeing their household incomes protected when they are getting no support from this Government at all? What plans does the Minister have to meet members of the ExcludedUK group to make sure that those who have had no support at all can actually survive Christmas?

Steve Barclay: As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor set out a moment ago, the Financial Secretary to the Treasury will be meeting that group, but we have also targeted the support, including on those who are majority self-employed. Through that targeting, we have been able to confirm an additional £2.4 billion of support for the Scottish Government.

Stephen Flynn: In his spending review statement last week, the Chancellor failed even to mention Brexit, but the Office for Budget Responsibility was not quite so shy; indeed, it painted a particularly bleak picture. Can the Minister clarify this: does he accept the OBR's findings, and if so, does he therefore agree that Scotland's economic future will be detrimentally impacted by any Brexit on the watch of this Tory Government?

Steve Barclay: What economic analysis has always shown is that Scotland's trade with the rest of the United Kingdom is much more important than its trade with Europe. However, Government Members have always been clear that we seek a deal. The asks that the negotiating team have put forward are extremely reasonable, and Lord Frost and the team continue to work to that effect.

Bounce Back Loan Scheme

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): What recent estimate he has made of the number of loans provided through the bounce back loan scheme. [909588]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): As of 15 November, the bounce back loan scheme has supported nearly 1.4 million businesses with facilities totalling over £42 billion. This includes the extra amounts received from our bounce back loans, which have been topped up to a higher amount, providing further help to businesses that are in need of monetary support.

Kevin Hollinrake: The scheme has been a huge success, but according to research by the all-party parliamentary group on fair business banking and by Funding Xchange, about 250,000 businesses were locked out of the scheme because they banked with non-bank lenders and the banks that have liquidity to provide funds in this way either closed to new customers or have no appointments left until the end of January, when the scheme closes. What action is my hon. Friend taking to address this very important issue?

John Glen: The Government cannot force lenders to open to new bank customers for bounce back loans, but we have repeatedly encouraged lenders to open when it is operationally possible for them to do so. Indeed, nine lenders have managed to open to new customers for a period, and two are currently open, although for limited services. Their efforts, combined with the fact that accredited lenders account for a very high proportion of business in personal current accounts, mean that the vast majority of businesses should be able to get a bounce back loan through their existing relationship. Following the decision by the Chancellor to extend the scheme to 31 January, there are now two and a half months left to apply for a loan, after which we will be introducing a new guarantee scheme.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): This weekend, we will mark Small Business Saturday, when we all have the opportunity to praise the work of the fantastic small businesses that contribute so much to our local economies and have been through such a tough time this year. Bounce back loans have helped small businesses, but because of the ongoing pandemic, they have, by definition, also left some businesses with debts that they may not be able to pay. What is the Government's estimate of the likely rate of default on bounce back loans, and what further support can the Government give to small businesses whose trading conditions will continue to be severely impaired for months to come?

John Glen: The right hon. Gentleman rightly praises the work of small businesses up and down the country, and I echo his sentiments. He asks about the provision we have made for the future of bounce back loans. Those who have taken out the loans will not be starting to repay, because there is an interest-free period until May next year. Indeed, we have decided to extend the time to pay for up to 10 years. Clearly, we keep these matters under review and are very sensitised to the

burdens that small businesses face. That is why, as the Chancellor said earlier, we have introduced a number of measures in addition to the bounce back loans to support small businesses at this time.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister talked about the default issues on the loans but also about extended payback. Has he or the Treasury done a calculation about whether that will reduce the up to 80% expected potential for default on the payback of these loans, which businesses obviously need but which will hit taxpayers very dearly?

John Glen: There have been a range of estimates due to the considerable challenges in verifying data. What I would say is that our priority has been to protect as many businesses and jobs throughout with this intervention. We have always considered the fraud risks and the need to maintain a sense that the loans need to be paid back, but the Cabinet Office and the British Business Bank are continuing to work on that mitigation strategy, where we have a mandatory system to detect multiple applications. The default risk is an evolving picture that we will keep very close to.

Aviation Sector: Financial Support

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): What recent financial support his Department has provided to the aviation sector; and if he will make a statement. [909589]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman): It is great to see you in the Chair, Mr Speaker.

I thank my right hon. Friend for his very constructive engagement with the Government on this important issue. The Government have recently announced, as he will be aware, a package of financial support for English airports and ground handlers. This support, which will shore up jobs and reinforce local economies, will be equivalent to the business rates liabilities of each business up to a maximum of £8 million per site. It has been warmly welcomed by the Airport Operators Association.

Chris Grayling: I thank the Minister for that additional support for regional airports, which is very welcome, but the steps taken by the Government generally to move a small distance towards reopening the aviation sector last week go nowhere near what is needed. We face a situation in January when the Brexit transition period will be open, but our principal airports and our principal aviation links to key business centres around the world will effectively still be closed. I urge the Chancellor and the Minister to use every influence they have in government to get that dealt with and at least to get airport testing and what is necessary available on those key strategic routes.

Jesse Norman: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to focus on testing. As he will be aware, the "test to release" regime combines a much shorter self-isolation period with a real focus on public health. As he will also know from the global travel taskforce report, we as a country are continuing to explore pre-departure testing with partner countries on a bilateral basis, including different models by which that might be delivered.

Mr Speaker: Question 15 is withdrawn, but we have a supplementary question to the Chancellor.

Covid-19: Public Finances

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rishi Sunak): The economic impacts of coronavirus and the substantial fiscal support provided have meant a necessary increase in our deficit and debt levels this year. That is the right thing to do to combat the pandemic, but once the economic recovery begins and uncertainty recedes, we will return our public finances to a sustainable and strong position.

Mel Stride (Central Devon) (Con) [V]: There are reports that the Treasury has created an economic impact analysis, providing significant detail on the effect of coronavirus across the various sectors of the economy. For each sector, this analysis allocates red, amber and green ratings for revenue, jobs and financial stability. Given the vote tonight, may I ask my right hon. Friend why that analysis has not been published?

Rishi Sunak: My right hon. Friend will have seen the analysis we did publish, which talked specifically about sectoral impact. In the document, there were specific links to the various places that people can find gross value added and employment by sector and, indeed, the financial resilience of local businesses at some stages by sector and by region. It is that analysis, as we have said, that will determine the particular economic impact in an area. That information is all provided in the report for people to look at.

Self-Employed People: Covid-19 Support

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support self-employed people affected by the covid-19 outbreak. [909593]

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support self-employed people affected by the covid-19 outbreak. [909602]

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support self-employed people affected by the covid-19 outbreak. [909604]

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): What steps he is taking to support freelancers during the covid-19 outbreak. [909611]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman): As my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Felicity Buchan) will be aware, the Government have taken unprecedented steps to support the self-employed during this crisis, which include the self-employment income support scheme, which has been extended up to April, with details of the third grant published last week.

Felicity Buchan: Many self-employed people are at the forefront of innovation and start-ups. Can my right hon. Friend tell me what the Treasury is doing to support innovation as we look to rebuild our economy?

Jesse Norman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the importance of innovation. She will be delighted to know that the Government are protecting innovators and start-ups from the impact of covid through almost

£900 million of future fund loans to date, £79 million for innovation loans as well as other grants, and that comes on top of more than £5 billion of support through research and development tax credits claimed for 2018-19 so far, which support more than £35 billion of R&D expenditure.

Stephen Metcalfe [V]: I thank my right hon. Friend for all he has done so far to support the self-employed, but will he keep an open mind when it comes to future support? As he will be aware, millions have benefited from the schemes he has introduced, but there is a minority who have not. As the pandemic is lasting longer than we had imagined, will he look again at what else can be done for those who have had no income for nine months?

Jesse Norman: I should make it perfectly clear to my hon. Friend, as the Chancellor has, that we take these points extremely seriously. We have been given many different suggestions over the past few months of ways in which we could accommodate these concerns. We have looked at them very closely, and so far we have struggled to find one that meets the need to avoid the fraud risk that bedevils this concern. I responded last week to the latest request to meet from the Federation of Small Businesses, the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants and ForgottenLtd to explore the latest of these schemes. I have also said that I would be happy to meet the all-party parliamentary group, alongside ExcludedUK, to address these questions.

Simon Baynes: When will the recently announced increase in the coronavirus business interruption loan scheme term from six to 10 years come into effect? That is of particular importance to businesses that have been hard hit by the crisis, such as the wedding venue and hospitality sectors in Clwyd South and elsewhere in the UK.

Jesse Norman: We of course recognise the concerns that my hon. Friend raises. We should be clear that the purpose of this extension is not simply to allow borrowers to request a 10-year term. It is that the guarantee offered by the Government on these schemes should be extended up to 10 years where lenders deem that a forbearance tool that borrowers may need and benefit from. My colleagues are working at pace with the British Business Bank to implement the policy in line with state aid rules.

Sir Robert Neill: Does my right hon. Friend accept that self-employed people and freelancers—many of whom are formed as limited companies, not because they choose to but because they are required to do so by the agencies or contractors they work for or by insurers—continue to fall through the net? Would it not be a good idea for him to meet directly some of those who work in these sectors? I suspect that many of those who advise him in the Treasury have no understanding of how self-employment actually works.

Jesse Norman: As my hon. Friend will be aware, I have a history of being closely involved with the performing arts sector. As I have indicated, I will be meeting many of the groups representing people in this situation. He should be aware that, in addition to the £1.57 billion culture recovery fund, the Government have put in place the film and TV insurance scheme, to which more than 150 applications have been made so far. The Government do take, and continue to take, these issues extremely seriously.

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): The situation for the self-employed is especially difficult in areas with additional restrictions and for those working in the hardest hit sectors. The Government's additional restrictions grant must go further in areas that have been in restrictions for longer. What plans do the Government have to improve this situation?

Jesse Norman: The hon. Lady will be aware that we have backdated business grants to address some of these concerns. It is also worth mentioning that the third phase alone of the self-employment scheme is expected to cost more than £7 billion. As the Chancellor said, it is part of a wider package of support that we are trying to give to businesses and individuals affected by the crisis.

Hydrogen Technology: Fiscal Support

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): What fiscal steps he is taking to support investment in (a) hydrogen fuel cell usage in the automotive industry and (b) the UK's hydrogen economy; and if he will make a statement. [909594]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Kemi Badenoch): The Government are supporting the development of the early fuel cell electric vehicle market through the £23 million hydrogen for transport programme. The spending review confirmed that there would be an automotive transformation fund to help industry transition to low-carbon vehicles. At the spending review, the Chancellor also announced £240 million over the next four years to support the aim of 5 GW of low-carbon hydrogen by 2030.

Michael Fabricant [V]: I thank my hon. Friend for her answer. The West Midlands Rail Executive and I are very keen to re-establish passenger traffic on the Lichfield to Burton railway line, which currently is used just for freight traffic—it would stop, too, at the National Memorial Arboretum. The plan is that the locomotives will be powered by hydrogen fuel cells. Does my hon. Friend not agree with me that the levelling-up fund would be ideal for that project?

Kemi Badenoch: My hon. Friend is, as ever, a great champion for his local area. I understand that Transport for West Midlands, in partnership with Staffordshire Council and the local rail executive, has already engaged with the Restoring Your Railway fund. Regarding the specific proposal he is referencing, the Department for Transport has announced that there will be a further round of bidding for the fund. Other aspects of the proposal might be eligible for support from the £4 billion levelling-up fund; the Government will set out more details on eligibility in due course.

Disguised Remuneration Schemes: HMRC Contractors

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): How many contractors have worked for HMRC while using disguised remuneration schemes. [909596]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman): Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs is aware of 15 contractors who have used disguised remuneration schemes while engaged either by the department or by Revenue and Customs Digital Technology Services. In each of the cases, the contractors were engaged via an agency or a company providing this service. It is important to be clear that Revenue and Customs does not engage in or enter into disguised remuneration schemes. It is possible for a contractor providing services to HMRC to use a disguised scheme without the department's knowledge or by participation through a third party.

Sammy Wilson: I am amazed at the Minister's answer—that firms can use methods of payment that HMRC then declares to be illegal and that no checks have been done by HMRC on those contractors. Does he not accept that it is unfair to put the burden on taxpayers who first of all entered into payments through disguised remuneration because we were forced to do so, and who declared that on tax returns which HMRC did not challenge, yet HMRC is now telling us that it did not even check that contractors it employed were paying in that way? How many of these contractors have HMRC actually pursued for forcing employees to use schemes that have been deemed illegal?

Jesse Norman: I think the right hon. Gentleman is slightly unclear on this. HMRC takes careful steps to ensure that the people whom it deals with as agencies employ on a proper and appropriate basis. When, in very rare cases among hundreds and hundreds of contractors in a fast-moving market, it may become clear that someone has in fact been hired under such a scheme, it takes immediate steps to end that relationship and then to follow up, of course, and to pursue as may be required under law. If he is concerned about the interests of taxpayers, let me remind him that many of the people who benefit from disguised remuneration have not been paying tax, from which our public services benefit, and it is those taxpayers whose interests we are also seeking to protect.

Loan Charge: Support

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support people who are subject to the loan charge. [909597]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman): Revenue and Customs has been clear on its commitment to support all taxpayers who might need help paying their loan charge liabilities. Where someone cannot afford to pay in full on time, it will seek to agree payment by instalments. Revenue and Customs has a dedicated helpline for those seeking to leave avoidance schemes, and the disguised remuneration and debt management teams are trained to identify taxpayers who may need extra help and support, and to refer them, if necessary, to outside organisations for support.

Stephen Hammond: As my right hon. Friend rightly recognises, there are a number of people who cannot pay the amount either in full at the beginning or in instalments. Given that HMRC has now recognised that many of these people were victims of mis-selling, is it not time to have another review of the people who have been mis-sold these schemes, and would it not be right and appropriate for those who mis-sold the schemes to make some contribution to those demands?

Jesse Norman: As my hon. Friend will be aware, a long and detailed review process has been conducted by Sir Amyas Morse. It is, of course, the individual's responsibility to ensure the accuracy of their tax returns and to understand the consequences of their decisions, although of course the Government very much sympathise with people who have been caught in that position. My hon. Friend may have noticed that we have been taking very vigorous action against promoters of tax avoidance schemes—most recently, in an announcement we made last week that HMRC and the Advertising Standards Authority are getting together to crack down on misleading promoting of tax avoidance schemes.

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Following the loan charge review, the Government promised in March that this year would bring both legislation and the announcement of additional policy measures against those who promote tax avoidance schemes. As neither has happened, will the Minister say when the promised changes will become law?

Jesse Norman: We will make an announcement about the response to the Amyas Morse review shortly.

Support for Businesses: Covid-19

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): What fiscal steps his Department is taking to support businesses affected by the covid-19 outbreak. [909598]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): The Government recognise the extreme disruption that the pandemic has caused to business, employment and the nation's economy, and our goal remains to protect people's jobs and livelihoods. That is why we have provided one of the most comprehensive and generous packages of support, worth £280 billion.

James Sunderland: I commend the Treasury on what it is doing at the moment to support businesses across the UK. Is the Treasury willing to extend the VAT cut to the hospitality, leisure and personal care sectors, and will it perhaps encourage businesses to pass on that VAT saving to consumers?

John Glen: The temporary reduced rate of VAT was introduced on 15 July to support the cash flow and viability of more than 150,000 businesses and protect 2.4 million jobs in the hospitality and tourism sectors, and it will now run until 31 March next year. This obviously comes at a considerable cost to the Exchequer, and while we keep all taxes under review, there are no plans to extend it further. Although the Government want businesses to pass on the benefit to customers if they can, obviously decisions on prices are ultimately for businesses rather than the Government.

Legacy Benefits: Universal Credit

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the economic effect of increasing legacy benefits by £20 per week in line with the recent increase to the standard universal credit allowance. [909599]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Steve Barclay): The £20 per week increase in universal credit and working tax credit is benefiting claimants by a total of £6.1 billion this year and is just one part of the wide-ranging package of Government support during this crisis.

Stephen Timms: The Joseph Rowntree Foundation points out that raising social security benefits not only helps hard-pressed families, but boosts the economy because the increase is likely to be spent. Does the Chief Secretary recognise that raising legacy benefits in line with the £20 a week increase he has referred to that has already been introduced in universal credit would boost the economy while also addressing the current unfair discrepancy between them?

Steve Barclay: I recognise that the right hon. Gentleman has, as Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, raised this issue on a number of occasions, and he will know that the uplift continues until the end of March; the benefit to which he refers continues until then. The Government are not ruling anything out for the future, but it is right that we wait for more clarity on the national economic picture before making any further decisions.

Support for People on Low Incomes: Covid-19

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): What steps he is taking to support people on low incomes during the covid-19 outbreak. [909600]

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): What steps he is taking to support people on low incomes during the covid-19 outbreak. [909609]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman): The Government's approach throughout the pandemic has been to try to support all families, but especially those on low incomes. We have announced a £30 billion plan for jobs to help people back into work, alongside wider measures including the furlough schemes, plus catch-up funding for schools and a substantial increase to the welfare safety net for this year, but it is important to say too that the Government are also supporting the lowest paid by increasing the national living wage to £8.91 and providing a minimum £250 pay increase for public sector workers earning less than £24,000 a year.

David Johnston: I welcome the national living wage and minimum wage rates going up in April despite the difficult economic backdrop. Does my right hon. Friend agree, however, that what happens to people on low incomes is not just about what Government do? It is also about what employers do, and we need them to provide good work with the right number of hours and the right skills and progression strategies, because that is what will help people on low incomes to earn more.

Jesse Norman: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend that it is important to focus on skills, and of course that is what the plan for jobs does. Our goal is to try to make sure that everyone, at whatever stage of life, has the opportunity and encouragement to improve their position in employment, and of course we also want employers to support them in doing that. It is well known that supportive and encouraging employers ultimately have more productive workforces because of the extra engagement they get. That is why the Department for Work and Pensions launched the in-work progression commission in order to try to understand better what those barriers to advancement might be and how they can be overcome both by the support of Government and by changes to the way in which employers develop and encourage staff.

Scott Benton: In addition to the extra support provided during this pandemic, as my right hon. Friend has already said, the introduction of a national living wage and changes to the tax system have ensured that the lowest paid are up to £6,000 per year better off under this Government. Does he agree that protecting those people who are in work but on low incomes must remain an absolute priority for this Government when difficult decisions have to be made at the Budget?

Jesse Norman: We certainly, of course, share the view that it is important—very important—to protect the low-paid. The purpose of supporting them through the national living wage was precisely in order to raise their incomes, and that increase is worth some £345 a year for a full-time worker. However, it is also important to say that the Government remain fully committed to their longer-term target for the national living wage, which will make an enormous contribution itself towards ending low pay in the UK, and that is before, as I have mentioned, the support we are giving to 2.1 million public sector workers earning less than £24,000 a year.

Loan Charge: HMRC Settlement

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con): How many and what proportion of people who have had settlement discussions with HMRC on the loan charge have reached a settlement. [909601]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman): About 11,000 employers and individuals settled their use of disguised remuneration schemes between Budget 2016 and 31 March 2020. As I indicated earlier, HMRC is currently preparing a report to Parliament on the implementation of the recommendations of the independent loan charge review, and that is due imminently. The report will include figures up to the 30 September 2020 deadline for taxpayers who settled their use of disguised remuneration tax avoidance schemes.

Gareth Bacon: I thank my right hon. Friend for his answer. In circumstances where process failings, errors and delays on the part of HMRC effectively denied people the possibility of settling their claims by 30 September, will he commit to offering an extended settlement period to allow individuals the chance to settle their debts?

Jesse Norman: As my hon. Friend will know, the settlement date has already been extended by eight months. That was a very important recognition of the impact of covid and has given individuals the chance to settle their schemes. He should also be aware that we do not merely seek to support those who are settling; we are also taking robust action against promoters and other enablers of tax avoidance schemes.

Net Zero Carbon Economy

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): What fiscal steps he is taking to help achieve a net zero carbon economy. [909605]

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to ensure that his fiscal policy incentivises environmentally positive behaviour. [909607]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Kemi Badenoch): The Chancellor's announcement at the spending review will help us meet our net zero 2050 target by providing the right incentives for individuals and businesses. The spending review commits £12 billion of public investment, kick-starting our transition to net zero and boosting the UK's global leadership on green infrastructure and technologies ahead of COP26 next year. It also includs funding that will encourage protection of the natural environment, including funds for planting trees, restoring peatland, creating natural habitats and investing in national parks.

Matthew Pennycook: A robust carbon price is essential to achieving a net zero carbon economy, yet despite the transition period ending in just 30 days' time, companies still have no precise idea what will replace the EU emissions trading system, which the UK will cease to participate in at that point. The House has already passed the legislation required to establish a stand-alone UK ETS, but there is no sign of the order necessary to fully implement a UK-wide carbon tax. With just 12 sitting days remaining, can the Minister confirm that the Government have determined that a stand-alone UK ETS is the fall-back option for 1 January and that the Treasury has abandoned a carbon emissions tax?

Kemi Badenoch: The hon. Gentleman will know that this has been the subject of negotiations, which are still ongoing. We legislated for a UK-linked ETS as well as a carbon emissions tax, and we will be announcing shortly which of those options we will be taking. We know that a UK-linked ETS is the preferred option at the moment, and that is the one that we are currently hoping we will be able to negotiate for during this period.

Mr Sheerman [V]: Everyone in the House knows that the Chancellor of Exchequer does not like green waffle, so may I challenge the Front-Bench team to stop the rhetoric and start producing policies? We already have an Agriculture Act that says we should have public money for public good; what about public money for environmental good? Let us have the taxation—the systems—that they have already introduced in the Nordic countries, but for goodness' sake let us get on with it.

Kemi Badenoch: The hon. Gentleman asks an interesting question, and I believe we are getting on with it. The Prime Minister's 10-point plan, announced just two weeks ago, outlines quite a lot of that. If the hon. Gentleman is talking about the costs, he should look at the announcement we made about the net zero interim review, which will be coming out before the end of the year. That will look at the options for a balance of contributions between households, businesses and the taxpayer, and how to maximise economic growth opportunities from the transition to net zero.

Topical Questions

[909644] **Andrew Griffith** (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rishi Sunak): This Government's economic priority remains the protection of jobs and people's livelihoods. It is our relentless focus. To that end, we have committed £280 billion this year.

Andrew Griffith: I thank my right hon. Friend for his answer. Many businesses in Arundel and South Downs, such as hospitality, events, beauty and wedding venues, have been hit terribly hard by the pandemic. It is no exaggeration to say that the support he has offered so far has been an absolute lifeline. But as my constituents now find themselves in tier 2, with all the uncertainty and restrictions, will he continue to do what he can to protect the very enterprises this nation will need—

Mr Speaker: Order. Questions have got to be short and punchy—that is the idea of topicals—to get everybody in.

Andrew Griffith: To prosper.

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend is right to champion his local businesses, something he knows well from his own experience. I can give him that reassurance. I know it has been a very difficult time for his small and medium-sized companies. They have my assurance that I will keep working hard to support them. He knows, better than most, that they will drive our recovery.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): Last week, the Chancellor said that public sector workers on less than £24,000 would be guaranteed a pay rise, but then said that they would receive a fixed increase of £250. Will he correct the record to confirm he is delivering a real-terms pay cut for many teaching assistants, prison officers and police constables?

Rishi Sunak: I stand by what I said. Those earning less than £24,000 in the public sector, 2.1 million people, or 38% of all people working in the public sector, will receive a guaranteed fixed increase of at least £250.

Anneliese Dodds: Even if no deal is avoided, we appear to be headed for a thin-as-gruel deal with the EU. The Office for Budget Responsibility says that that would lead to a long-run loss of output of about 4%. That is on top of the slowest recovery from covid in the G7, as predicted by the OECD today. The Chancellor previously said that his Government's deal would reduce costs for ordinary working families and promised its impact would be modelled. Will he provide that modelling, and is he confident that it will show that positive impact?

Rishi Sunak: I would not want to pre-empt the outcome of the ongoing talks, which I can say are constructive and proceeding with full intensity. I am very hopeful that they can reach a positive conclusion. More broadly, regardless of the exact nature of our trading relationship with our European friends and allies, I remain very confident in the economic future of our country and the opportunities that will come our way.

[909645] **Damien Moore** (Southport) (Con): Last week, my right hon. Friend announced the national infrastructure bank, which will be headquartered in the north of England, and a £4 billion infrastructure investment fund. Can he outline more of the details of those proposals and how, in particular, forthcoming projects will benefit my constituents in Southport?

Rishi Sunak: I am happy to provide that information. The new national infrastructure bank will invest in projects such as transport, digital infrastructure and renewable energy through a series of loans, guarantees, equity and other hybrid products. The levelling-up fund will fund what I call the infrastructure of everyday life—projects up to £20 million that can be delivered quickly—and will make a tangible difference to our constituents and increase the pride we feel in the places we call home.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Yesterday, Scotland's First Minister announced her intention to award a £500 thank you payment to Scottish health and social care staff in recognition of all they have done throughout the pandemic. Powers over tax allowances, exemptions and national insurance are reserved to the UK Government, so will the Chancellor do the right thing and ensure that this festive gift of good will is not clawed back by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs?

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Steve Barclay): As the hon. Lady should know, the income tax on these payments is actually paid to Scotland, not to Westminster. The Scottish Government have the power and the funding to gross up the payment if they wish. The UK Government have provided over £8.2 billion in extra funding for the Scottish Government this year to support people, businesses and public services.

[909648] **Dr Neil Hudson** (Penrith and The Border) (Con) [V]: The Government's financial support for people and businesses during the pandemic has been a lifeline, but many people have not been able to access support, such as some self-employed people, business owners, freelancers and company directors, including many in the tourism and hospitality sectors, which are so important in Cumbria and are now struggling to survive. Will the Government work to find a way to support these individuals, perhaps on a loss of income basis similar to the discretionary grants or hardship schemes that were devised for the dairy sector?

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman): My hon. Friend is absolutely right to focus on the specific impact that he and we all, as constituency MPs, have in our constituencies. I think he knows—we have discussed this at some length—that we are always happy to look for more schemes and more suggestions, and perhaps he would like to write to me with some details of what he has in mind. He will also be aware that, as I said, I am meeting the Federation of Small Businesses, the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants and, in due course, I hope, the all-party parliamentary group to discuss these issues in more detail.

[909646] **Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): During a covid briefing last week, a Health Minister suggested that the north-east is highly unlikely to be moved from tier 3 to tier 2 this side of the new year, even if there is a review in two weeks' time. Does the Chancellor share this message of no hope for the north-east? Will he publish his secret dashboard on the economic impact of covid, and does he agree that the Government need to be honest with the hospitality sector and go much further with support to stop more businesses going bust?

Rishi Sunak: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will listen carefully to what the Prime Minister and the Health Secretary have to say immediately after these questions, and I believe there is hope for all parts of our country as we fight against this virus. With regard to this dashboard, I would refer him to the document published, which contains a sectoral dashboard and, as I said, links to further information that people can find about the regional composition of their local economies, sectoral business resilience and employment outcomes.

[909649] **Elliot Colburn** (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): Carshalton and Wallington businesses, particularly pubs and restaurants, have been in touch and while they welcome the support that has been offered so far, they are concerned about having a road map to reopening and, indeed, the support over Christmas. Does the Minister anticipate, as we begin to roll out several vaccines, that we will have the road map to reopening, and will he look again at tiering restrictions, particularly in tier 2?

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): The covid-19 winter plan, published on 23 November, sets out the Government's plans for the coming months, and our objective is to find new and more effective ways of managing the virus to enable this route back to normality. That will be achieved through the deployment of vaccines, but also through improved medical treatments, expanding the capacity of the test and trace programme and using rapid testing to quickly identify and isolate cases. These measures will provide confidence as we approach spring that life will get back to normal.

[909647] **Ruth Jones** (Newport West) (Lab): Like so many in this House and across the country, I am very concerned by the threat to thousands of jobs triggered by the collapse of the Arcadia Group. The loss of Debenhams in Friars Walk in Newport West will have a massive impact on Newport city centre and the livelihoods of local people and their families. Will the Chancellor outline what discussions he has had about how he can give those people the support they deserve?

Rishi Sunak: The hon. Lady raises a good point. Obviously, the news about Arcadia and Debenhams will be deeply worrying for employees and their families, and the Government stand ready to support them. With regard to various things that are ongoing, there are negotiations between various parties in the companies at the moment, particularly with regard to pensions, and it would not be right for me to comment specifically on those, but she can rest assured that we keep an eye on the situation.

Mr Speaker: Let us go over to Robert Halfon and Sweep.

[909651] **Robert Halfon** (Harlow) (Con) [V]: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank my right hon. Friend for the financial package worth more than £150 million to support Harlow businesses and hard-working residents,

but will he recognise the difficulties that are being faced by my constituents, particularly freelancers and directors of limited companies, who have been without any form of financial support—or almost any form of financial support—for eight months now? This is having a detrimental impact on my constituents' livelihoods and mental health, so will the Minister outline what steps he is taking to ensure that these individuals, who have so far found themselves excluded from covid-19 support schemes, are able to access some significant financial assistance?

John Glen: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. Throughout the crisis, as he has acknowledged, the Government have spent over £280 billion. He referred to the self-employment income support scheme. Support for the grant has recently been increased from 55% to 80% of average trading profits from November to January, capped at £7,500 in total, and the claims window will be open until 30 November. Obviously, a range of additional support mechanisms have been put in place, including the additional restrictions grant. As my right hon. Friend the Financial Secretary said earlier, we will continue to look sympathetically and constructively at all other representations made.

[909650] **Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): I hear concerns from many pubs in my constituency, such as the Barmy Arms in Twickenham and the White Hart Inn in Whitton, about how on earth they are going to make it through this winter. Given that London is to be placed in tier 2, with some of its perverse rules for pubs, will the Chancellor look urgently at further extending VAT relief and business rates relief, and further grants for the sector, please?

Rishi Sunak: I know about the difficulties that the hospitality sector is experiencing at the moment. The hon. Lady will know that the various measures she spoke about—the business rates holiday and the VAT cut—last all the way through to next spring, so they will provide support during the winter, and we have in place a grants programme that provides grants to businesses in the hospitality sector, whether they are open in tier 2 or closed, with further support provided to local authorities for discretionary support, as they see fit.

[909652] **Mark Fletcher** (Bolsover) (Con): I warmly welcome the Chancellor's renewed commitment to levelling up in last week's spending review. Enterprise zones have a vital role to play in that levelling up. Will the Chancellor agree to meet me and some colleagues who have a particular interest in seeing a new generation of enterprise zones?

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Kemi Badenoch): My hon. Friend is right to raise this important issue. The Treasury recognises the role that enterprise zones play in our economy. This is an area specifically of interest to me and I will be delighted to meet him to discuss it further.

[909654] **Tommy Sheppard** (Edinburgh East) (SNP) [V]: Contrary to the impression given a few moments ago, it is only the United Kingdom Government who can exempt bonus payments to Scottish key workers from tax and national insurance under schedule 5 of the Scotland Act 1998. If they choose not to do so, the Treasury will get a windfall from these payments, with the consequent reduction in the Scottish block grant. So I ask again: will the Chancellor allow Scottish key workers to keep the full value of the bonus that they are being given by the Scottish Government?

Steve Barclay: First, the approach of the United Kingdom Government to these Scottish payments is exactly the same as applied recently in Wales. To further reinforce the point that I made a moment ago, while decisions on whether to exempt these payments are reserved, the Scottish Government will keep all the income tax receipts from these payments, so if they wish NHS and care workers to receive £500 net of tax, which is what they say is their wish, they can simply increase the value of the payments going to them. That is the point of substance. That is the point they do not want to engage on.

[909656] **Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): Does anybody in this Conservative Government still believe in a low-tax, deregulated and small-state Britain? In which case, what are they going to do about it? As they prepare for the Budget, may I suggest one that reduces, not increases, taxes on entrepreneurs and wealth creators, to kick-start the economy?

Rishi Sunak: That is music to my ears. My right hon. Friend is absolutely right: this is a Government who believe in a low-tax dynamic economy. He will also appreciate that, in the midst of the crisis that we are facing, it is incumbent on the Government to provide unprecedented support to preserve the economic capacity of our country. But as soon as we get through this, I, like him, look forward to returning to that dynamic free market economy that we both passionately believe in.

[909657] **Andrea Leadsom** (South Northamptonshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the best time to invest in the emotional lifelong capacity of a human being that leads to future economic productivity is in the critical period between conception and the age of two? The Prime Minister's levelling-up agenda will be best served by ensuring that every single baby across our United Kingdom gets the best start in life.

Kemi Badenoch: I assure my right hon. Friend that I agree with her. The Government remain committed to improving health outcomes during the first 1,001 days and early childhood. At the spending review, we confirmed an additional £25.8 million to increase the value of healthy start vouchers to £4.25, in line with the recommendation of the national food strategy, to help combat child food poverty and to give children the best start in life. I am very supportive of her review of early years health, and I look forward to reading her final recommendation.

[909664] **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Chancellor provided £750 million for charities at the start of the pandemic. However, that money has been spent, and the charity sector now faces £10 billion of debt. Many organisations are due to close, and there was no mention of support in his statement last week. What additional support will he provide to save our charities and help them do their vital work?

Steve Barclay: As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor set out earlier, and as the Office for Budget Responsibility set out last week, the total package of support comes to over £280 billion. In the spending review last week we also signalled further support as part of our covid response, with an additional £55 billion next year. Of course my right hon. Friend continues to keep under review the specific support to the charity sector, but as he said earlier, a comprehensive package of support has already been allocated. We will of course keep that under review.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): My right hon. Friend will know that pubs in tier 2 areas such as York will be hit particularly hard by the Government's requirement to serve alcohol only with a meal. Given that pubs were already struggling prior to the pandemic, does he agree that now, more than ever, we need a fundamental reassessment of the way we tax beer and pubs?

Steve Barclay: As the Chancellor set out in the Budget, we are undertaking a comprehensive alcohol duty review, which will provide an opportunity to look at this issue in depth. My hon. Friend will also be aware that in six of the last seven Budgets the Government have cut or frozen beer duty, meaning that it is now at its lowest level for 30 years, but as part of our wider support package we will obviously keep that under review.

Points of Order

12.31 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I hope that you will indulge me, because I have two points of order on two separate questions. My apologies in advance for that. First, further to the question that I raised and that my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) raised, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury seems to have missed the point entirely on grossing. The Scottish Government do not receive income tax revenue in-year. Income tax is collected by HMRC and accrues to the Treasury, and it is reconciled in 2023. Grossing means a net loss to the Scottish budget this year—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry, but this is not a point of order for me; it is a continuation of the debate. I cannot take it as a point of order.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You will recall that on 19 November you were kind enough to grant me an urgent question on the performance of the Department of Health and Social Care in answering written questions. The Minister, in responding, said:

"We have instituted a parliamentary questions performance recovery plan".—[*Official Report*, 19 November 2020; Vol. 684, c. 461.]

I then put down a question asking for that plan to be put in the House of Commons Library, so that we could all see it. Late last night, I received a reply saying that it was not possible to answer that question yet. Surely this now means that the whole issue of stonewalling has become farcical, particularly when we take it into account that a lot of the other outstanding questions are highly relevant to the debate we will be having this afternoon.

Mr Speaker: I have a lot of sympathy with Members. All Members are answerable to their constituents, and if they cannot get answers their constituents are not getting the service that should be provided. I do not think that that was a satisfactory answer, and the hon. Gentleman will no doubt wish to put in for another urgent question if the situation does not improve later today.

Alison Thewliss: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This one relates to the answer given by the Financial Secretary to the Treasury and the accuracy of his answers. Is it in order for Ministers not to be clear on who they are meeting with? Excluded UK claims that it has had no such contact as was referred to by the Financial Secretary to the Treasury.

Mr Speaker: Unfortunately that is not a point of order for me. It is a continuation of the debate. I am sure that, through the hon. Lady's good offices, she will find other ways in which to ensure that her views can be expressed, and they will also be on the record.

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 shall now suspend the House for a few minutes.

12.34 pm

Sitting suspended.

Apologies

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

12.38 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision for the effect of an apology in certain legal proceedings; and for connected purposes.

Let me start by declaring that I am an associate of the Chartered Institute of Arbitrators, since the heart of the Bill lies within the dispute resolution and dispute prevention system. I will also say what the Bill does not do: it does not take away any rights that we may have to go to court on any issue. However, it does introduce an element of civility and common sense back into society. It allows an apology to be given that is genuinely and sincerely meant without creating a legal liability that would run into millions of pounds.

Simply put, an apology that does not create a legal liability will often settle a dispute, rather than being seen as a way to take the accused for every penny they have. It should be the mark of a mature democratic society and of its dispute resolution system that an apology, whether made publicly or privately, can and should be allowed to be meaningful and helpful rather than simply a necessary yet tokenistic gesture. An apology can truly change atmospheres, the nature of conversations and outcomes. Used appropriately, it can help to avoid a dispute going to court. Equally, it can assist the resolution of a case by changing the approach being taken.

The policy driver behind the initiative is that apologies can often unlock disputes and lead to settlements without recourse to formal legal action. Since parties may be reluctant to do anything that may be construed as an admission of liability, apologies have to date seemingly been sparse, except in cases of NHS clinical negligence. A culture has emerged of people and organisations not wanting to offer an apology in case it is detrimental to their legal position or deemed to be a weakness. With tragic incidents such as that of Grenfell Tower, and the need to improve multicultural community cohesion, the time has come to extend the current limited legislative provisions.

A fresh apologies Act would be a clear statement from Westminster and a simple legal mechanism to help to improve our country's conversations. It could incentivise disputing parties to make apologies whether in the direct aftermath of an accident, mistake or other dispute, or further down the line, should the dispute escalate, with a view to achieving a more amicable resolution.

An NHS publication, "Saying sorry", published in June 2017, reminds of a little-known provision in the Compensation Act 2006, which provides:

"An apology, an offer of treatment or other redress, shall not of itself amount to an admission of negligence or breach of statutory duty."

More significantly, in the same medical context, there is the duty of candour under the Health and Social Care Act 2008, which is more fully described in a leaflet published by Action against Medical Accidents and endorsed by the Care Quality Commission. The General Medical Council and the Nursing and Midwifery Council advise that it means that healthcare professionals must

tell the patient when something has gone wrong; apologise to the patient; offer an appropriate remedy or support to put matters right, if that is possible; and explain fully to the patient the short and long-term effects of what has happened.

How has such common-sense advice worked in practice? A search during the preparation of this speech found that there was limited empirical research through acknowledgements of the benefits and anecdotal examples of its successes. In fact, the most helpful insight into the successful outcomes of medical apologies comes from an article in the *National Law Review*, a US professional publication, dated 6 November 2018. Although the majority of US states have, on the one hand, apology legislation, but on the other, a highly litigious approach to life's adversities—from the current President downwards—none the less:

"Physicians typically recall, with stunning clarity, the moment a patient's treatment went wrong. Following an adverse event, physicians often are tormented by competing desires to apologize and instincts to forge ahead without acknowledgement. A patient's decision to file a malpractice action may be triggered by the physician's response to a problem—or lack thereof…Apologies may decrease feelings of frustration and anger that drive some plaintiffs to file lawsuits. A study published in the *Journal of Patient Safety and Risk Management* found that"

those engaging in a

"'collaborative communication resolution program' experienced a significant decrease in the filing of legal claims, defense costs, liability costs and time required to close cases…Events with medical errors were resolved by apology alone in 43% of the cases. Similar programs have cut the number of malpractice lawsuits and yielded dramatic litigation cost savings."

Not only do the majority of US states have apology statutes, but so do Australia, Canada and even Hong Kong, whose legislature was the first jurisdiction in Asia to enact apology legislation through the 2017 ordinance, but was unable to put its best intentions into effect due to the growing restrictions from mainland China on its governance and judicial systems.

Closer to home, there is the approach taken by Holyrood with a short yet powerful statement: the Apologies (Scotland) Act 2016, which contains only six clauses, including its commencement and short title. It defines an apology as

"any statement made by or on behalf of a person which indicates that the person is sorry about, or regrets, an act, omission or outcome and includes any part of the statement which contains an undertaking to look at the circumstances giving rise to the act, omission or outcome with a view to preventing a recurrence".

For an apology to be constituted within the terms of the Scottish Act, it must include an acknowledgment that there has been a bad outcome, an expression of regret, sorrow or sympathy, and a recognition of direct or indirect responsibility. In addition, there may also be an undertaking to review the circumstances of the incident with a view to making improvements or learning lessons. The Act applies to all civil, not criminal, legal proceedings, with some exceptions.

The following considerations are worth noting. Qualifying apologies may be oral or in writing. The core element of an apology as defined in the Act is an indication

"that the person is sorry about, or regrets, an act, omission or outcome".

Where the statement includes

"an undertaking to look at the circumstances…with a view to preventing a recurrence",

it qualifies as part of an apology. An apology does not include statements of fact or admissions of fault, so in any statement that includes both an apology and a statement of fact and/or an admission of fault, only the apology is inadmissible as evidence of liability. The Act makes it possible to apologise without fear of prejudicing the person making the apology or of the apology being used to attribute blame in litigation. It applies to all civil proceedings except four types of specific actions. As I said, it does not apply to criminal proceedings.

In a subsequent article written by Scotland's most high-profile mediator, John Sturrock QC explains how that piece of legislation achieved the rare distinction of attracting enthusiastic cross-party support:

"Over more than two years, Margaret Mitchell"—

a Conservative MSP—

"has piloted this legislation through the Scottish Parliament with skill and tact…As one member noted: '…Both sides have been pretty consensual in trying to ensure that we end up with something that the Parliament can be genuinely proud of.'"

The essence is

"that apologies have the great value of acknowledging that something has gone wrong and demonstrating that lessons have been learned. We all know that mistakes happen—that is a sad fact of life—and that they can often have tragic and long-lasting consequences. However, it is how we deal with those mistakes that makes the difference."

John Sturrock continues:

"It is clear that legislation alone cannot remove social barriers to apologising, but the bill is an important step in changing attitudes to apologies."

As my fellow officer of the all-party parliamentary group on alternative dispute resolution, the right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar), and I learned and wrote about in our recent APPG report, "Securing the UK's position as a global disputes hub: Best practice lessons between Singapore and the UK", policy makers and institutions in the UK and Singapore should foster a paradigm shift so that disputes are not viewed solely through a legalistic lens. An ever-wider and ever-deeper range of dispute resolution options should be pursued. We must also think about disputes in a way that goes beyond the legal conceptual framework and encompasses all aspects of commercial relationships.

I commend the Scottish approach to the House. It is short, focused and yet of profound effect, much like the speech I have just given.

Mr Speaker: No apologies then!

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That John Howell, John Spellar, Greg Clark, Chris Grayling, Chris Bryant, Kenny MacAskill, Sir Paul Beresford, Sir Roger Gale, Sir Robert Neill, Mrs Heather Wheeler, Sir Jeffrey Donaldson and Rob Butler present the Bill.

John Howell accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 5 March 2021 and to be printed (Bill 221).

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (TODAY)

Ordered,

That, at today's sitting, notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 16 (Proceedings under an Act or on European Union Documents), debate on the Motions in the name of Secretary Matt Hancock relating to the Health Protection

(Coronavirus, Restrictions) (All Tiers) (England) Regulations 2020 (SI, 2020, No.1374) and the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Local Authority Enforcement and Amendment Powers) (England) Regulations 2020 (SI, 2020, No. 1375) may continue until 7.00pm, at which time the Speaker shall put the questions necessary to bring proceedings on each Motion to a conclusion; and Standing Order No. 41A shall not apply.—*(Mr Rees-Mogg.)*

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

12.50 pm

Sitting suspended.

Public Health

Mr Speaker: The Business of the House motion just agreed to by the House provides for motions 3 and 4 on today's Order Paper to be debated together, but the question will be put separately on each motion at the end of the debate.

12.53 pm

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): I beg to move,

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (All Tiers) (England) Regulations 2020 (S.I., 2020, No. 1374), dated 30 November 2020, a copy of which was laid before this House on 30 November, be approved.

Mr Speaker: With this we shall take the following motion:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Local Authority Enforcement Powers) (England) Regulations 2020 (S.I., 2020, No. 1375), dated 30 November 2020, a copy of which was laid before this House on 30 November, be approved.

The Prime Minister: I want to begin by telling the House that I was hugely encouraged by a visit I paid only yesterday to a vaccine plant in north Wales, where I saw for myself the vials of one of seven vaccines backed by the UK Government that could turn the tide of our struggle against covid, not just in this country but around the world. It is the protection provided by those vaccines that could get our economies moving again and allow us to reclaim our lives. That one plant in Wrexham could produce 300 million doses a year. Yesterday was the momentous day when it began to manufacture the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine, and it was a very moving moment. I talked to one of the brilliant young scientists there, and she described the extraordinary moment in her life of being part of an enterprise that she thought was truly going to offer humanity a route out of this suffering.

But we have to be realistic, and we have to accept that this vaccine is not here yet—no vaccine is here yet. While all the signs are promising, and almost every scientist I have talked to agrees that the breakthrough will surely come, we do not yet have one that has gained regulatory approval, and we cannot be completely sure when the moment will arrive. Until then, we cannot afford to relax, especially during the cold months of winter. The national measures that are shortly ending in England have eased the burden on the NHS and begun to reverse the advance of the virus. Today the R is back below one, and the Office for National Statistics survey shows signs that the infection rate is levelling off. Imperial College London has found that the number of people with covid has fallen by a third in England since 2 November.

But while the virus has been contained, it has not been eradicated. The latest ONS figures suggest that, out of every 85 people in England, one has coronavirus—far more than in the summer. Between 24 November and yesterday, 3,222 people across the UK lost their lives. Despite the immense progress of the last four weeks, our NHS remains under pressure, with hospitals in three regions—the south-west, the north-east and Yorkshire—all treating more covid patients now than at the peak of the first wave.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): The Prime Minister talked about the virus being eradicated. Only one virus in history has been eradicated. Containment may well be the only option open to us.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is, of course, completely right. Containment is the objective of the tiering scheme that the Government are announcing, and I hope the Opposition will support that tonight, in spite of what I gather is their decision to abstain, which seems extraordinary to me. We cannot simply allow the current restrictions to expire, for the reason he gives, with no replacement whatever. With the spread of the epidemic varying across the country, there remains a compelling case for regional tiers in England and, indeed, a compelling necessity for regional tiers.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): The latest rate in my area is 79 per 100,000 people. A week ago, it was 178. We went into lockdown in tier 1 and will come out in tier 2. Pubs and restaurants in my constituency are in the worst of all worlds. In asking me to support these regulations tonight, what hope can the Prime Minister give them?

The Prime Minister: Indeed, and I will come in just a moment to what more we hope to do for pubs, restaurants and everybody in the hospitality sector, whose anguish and difficulties everybody in this Chamber understands and appreciates.

I hope the House is clear about what I am not asking for today. This is not another lockdown, nor is this the renewal of existing measures in England. The tiers that I am proposing would mean that from tomorrow, everyone in England, including those in tier 3, will be free to leave their homes for any reason. When they do, they will find the shops open for Christmas, the hairdressers open, the nail bars open, and gyms, leisure centres and swimming pools open.

Mark Jenkinson (Workington) (Con): My constituency sits entirely within the Borough of Allerdale, where our rates have declined to just over 70 per 100,000, and we are due to enter tier 2 restrictions. Will the Prime Minister commit to a more local tiering system, so that the hard work of my constituents is rewarded?

The Prime Minister: Yes, indeed. This is a point that many of my hon. and right hon. Friends have made to me and to the Government with great force and eloquence over the past few days. We want to be as granular as possible as we go forward to reflect the reality and the human geography of the epidemic, and we shall be so. What I can say is that, from tomorrow, across the whole country, not just gyms, leisure centres and swimming pools will be open, but churches, synagogues, mosques and temples will reopen for communal worship, organised outdoor sport will resume and, in every tier, people will be able to meet others in parks and in public gardens, subject to the rule of six. Every one of those things has been, by necessity, restricted until today. Every one of them will be allowed again tomorrow. Of course, I accept that this is not a return to normality—I wish it were so—but it is a bit closer to normality than the present restrictions. What we cannot do is lift all the restrictions at once or move too quickly in such a way that the virus would begin to spread rapidly again. That would be the surest way of endangering our NHS and forcing us into a new year lockdown with all the costs that that would impose.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for giving way. After the inconsistencies and controversies of the previous tiering system, what was required this time round was more fairness, clarity and transparency. We were promised a regional approach. However, what the powers that be have done is place little old Slough in tier 3, despite the fact that we have been segregated from the wider region and that there are areas in neighbouring London and Essex with higher covid transmission rates. Why does the Prime Minister hate Slough? What have we done to annoy him so much?

The Prime Minister: I love Slough, but I understand what the hon. Gentleman is saying. I appreciate people's feelings of injustice, and people do feel it. There is no question but that people feel that they have been unfairly attracted by proximity into a higher tier than they deserve. People also feel the tiering is not working for them. I want to repeat the answer that I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mark Jenkinson), which is that, as we go forward—I mean this very sincerely—the Government will look at how we can reflect as closely as possible the reality of what is happening on the ground for local people, looking at the incidence of the disease, looking at the human geography and spread of the pandemic, and, indeed, looking at the progress that areas are making in getting the virus down. We will try to be as sensitive as possible to local effort and to local achievement in bringing the pandemic under control.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

The Prime Minister: I want to make a little bit of progress, because I want to say something now about our hospitality sector, which I know the House will want to hear.

We all accept that the burden on the hospitality sector has been very great, and we feel this deeply, because our pubs, our hotels and our restaurants are, in many ways, the heart of our communities and part of the fabric of our identity as a country. Everybody can see that the hospitality industry has borne a disproportionate share of the burden in this crisis. There is no question about it. That is obviously because we want to keep schools open and we have to take such measures as we can. I just remind the House, however, that we are not alone in that: in France, bars, restaurants and gyms will not reopen until 20 January at the earliest; and in Germany, the hospitality sector will remain closed in its entirety over Christmas.

We will do everything in our power to support our hospitality sector throughout this crisis. We have already extended the furlough scheme for all businesses until the end of March. We have provided monthly grants of up to £3,000 for premises forced to close and £2,100 for those that remain open but have suffered because of reduced demand. We have allocated £1.1 billion for local authorities to support businesses at particular risk. Today, we are going further, with a one-off payment of £1,000 in December to wet pubs—that is, pubs that do not serve food, as the House knows—recognising how hard they have been hit by this virus in what is typically their busiest month. We will also work with the hospitality sector in supporting their bounce back next year.

[The Prime Minister]

I want to stress that the situation is profoundly different now, because there is an end in sight. I am not seeking open-ended measures this afternoon; on the contrary, the regulations come with a sunset clause at the end of 2 February, at which point we will have sufficient data to assess our position after Christmas. Though I believe that these types of restrictions will be needed until the spring, they can be extended beyond 2 February only if this House votes for them.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): In the week up to 25 November, Market Rasen ward had six cases and is to go to tier 3; East Ham ward in London had 40 cases in that week and is to go into tier 2. What I want from my right hon. Friend is an absolute personal commitment that he and his right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care will look personally at the case of Lincolnshire and do their level best to get us out of tier 3 by Christmas.

The Prime Minister: Indeed, I can certainly give my right hon. Friend that assurance: we will look in as much granular detail as we can at the incidence throughout the country. These points have been made with great power by Members from all parties. We will review the allocation of tiers every 14 days, starting on 16 December.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

The Prime Minister: I just want to make an important point to my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) and to all Members who are rightly concerned about the position of their constituencies—our constituencies—in these tiers. Members have it in their power—in our power—to help to move our areas down the tiers by throwing their full weight—throwing our full weight as leaders in our communities—behind community testing and seizing the opportunity to encourage as many people as possible to take part.

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): Kent is the biggest county by population in Britain and there are vast differences in the rate of covid within it. In Tunbridge Wells, we have one of the lowest incidences in the country. Will the Prime Minister give a commitment that at the first possible review on 16 December, if a particular borough meets the five criteria that he has set, he will move it down to a lower tier?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is quite right to raise the position of Tunbridge Wells, and I know that the feelings of the people of Tunbridge Wells are shared by many people across the country who feel this sense of being unjustly attracted into the wrong level of tiering. I repeat the assurance that I have given to my hon. Friend the Member for Workington and my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough: we will look in granular detail at local incidence—at the human geography of the pandemic—and take account of exactly what is happening every two weeks. To repeat my point, it is in the power of Members to help their local area to move down the tiers.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

The Prime Minister: I am going to give way one last time, to the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey).

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Will the Prime Minister ensure that anyone who wants to take a test to confirm that they do not have the virus before they visit family members over Christmas can have a test on the NHS?

The Prime Minister: We are rolling out lateral flow testing across the country and it is open to people to get a lateral flow test, but in general the testing system is available at the moment for people who have symptoms. I urge people who are worried that they may need to be in the company of those who are elderly or vulnerable to seek a rapid-turnaround test. *[Interruption.]* The one thing the right hon. Gentleman could do for his constituents if he wants to help them to move out of the tier they are in is encourage them all to take part in mass community testing of the kind that the Government are rolling out.

This depends very much on the co-operation of local leaders and local authorities of the kind that we have seen in Liverpool, where, since 6 November, over 284,000 tests have been conducted. That together with the effect of national restrictions, meant that the number of cases fell by more than two thirds. This is the model that I would recommend. We are now proposing that from tomorrow Liverpool city region and Warrington should be in tier 2 whereas previously, obviously, they were in tier 3. We want other regions and other towns, cities and communities to follow this path. That is why, with the help of our fantastic armed forces, we will be offering community testing to tier 3 areas as quickly as possible.

Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): What assessment has the Prime Minister made of compliance with previous lockdowns? Does he share my concern that people have just had enough and that the risk of non-compliance is very great, and that those who are compliant will then have the added frustration of watching those who will not comply doing whatever they want while they themselves have to sit at home?

The Prime Minister: I normally find myself in agreement with my right hon. Friend, but I must say that I do not think she is right in this instance. If we look at what the British people have achieved in the past few weeks by following the guidance, and by deciding to work together to get the R down, we see that they have done just that. Collectively, the people of this country have got the R back down below 1. That was not by non-compliance—it was by the people of this country deciding to follow the rules, do it together, and get the virus down.

I find it extraordinary that the official Opposition, represented by the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), currently have no view on the way ahead and are not proposing to vote tonight.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab) *rose—*

The Prime Minister: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman would like to tell us.

Mr Perkins: I am very pleased to hear it. Many Labour Members believe that there should be restrictions but believe that the Prime Minister's tiers are wrong. He is explaining very well why he is going to come back on 16 December and come up with a system that we might be able to vote for, but the system he is coming up with today is totally inadequate. How is it possible that in Chesterfield, with 118 cases per 100,000, we are in tier 3, but London constituencies like the one he represents, with a much higher level, are in tier 2? It is because our pub owners and our restaurateurs are worthless to him.

The Prime Minister: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will really think carefully about what he has just said. We are trying to look after pubs, restaurants and businesses across this entire country, and no one feels the anguish of those businesses more than this Government.

I do think it is extraordinary that in spite of the barrage of criticism that we have, we have no credible plan from the Labour party. Indeed, we have no view on the way ahead. It is a quite extraordinary thing that, to the best of my knowledge, the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras, who said that he would always act in the national interest, has told his party to sit on its hands and to abstain in the vote tonight. The Government have made their decision, we have taken some tough decisions, and the Labour Opposition have decided tonight, heroically, to abstain. I think that when the history of this pandemic comes to be written, the people of this country will observe that instead of having politicians of all parties coming together in the national interest, they had one party taking the decisions and another party heroically deciding to abstain.

In the story of 2020, there are two great feats from which we can take a great deal of comfort. First, our country has come together in an extraordinary effort that has so far succeeded in protecting our NHS and in saving many lives, while our scientists have been zeroing in on the weaknesses of covid, telescoping 10 years of work into 10 months, and now their endeavours are about to deliver the means, as I say, to rout the virus. That is clear.

The Government are backing not one potential vaccine but seven. We have ordered 100 million doses of the Oxford AstraZeneca vaccine, which is now seeking regulatory approval; we have ordered 7 million doses of the Moderna vaccine, which has almost 95% effectiveness in trials; and we have ordered 40 million doses of the Pfizer BioNTech vaccine, which, if approved by the regulator, could start being administered before Christmas.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

The Prime Minister: No, I am coming to the end.

In total, our vaccines taskforce has secured more than 350 million doses—more than enough for everyone in the UK, the Crown dependencies and our overseas territories. All we need to do now is to hold our nerve until these vaccines are indeed in our grasp and indeed being injected into our arms. So I say to the House again, let us follow the guidance, let us roll out mass testing, let us work to deliver mass testing to the people of our country, let us work together to control the virus, and it is in that spirit that I commend these regulations to the House.

Mr Speaker: I will be introducing a four-minute time limit.

1.16 pm

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): May I start by welcoming the fall in infection numbers, with a drop in the number of people being admitted to hospital, and, crucially, the fact that the national R rate is now below 1, and below 1 in many parts of the country? That is very welcome news for the House. Before this lockdown, the infection rate was doubling every two weeks, the R number was above 1 in every part of England and rising, and the number of people in hospital was going up sharply across the country. In other words, the virus had been allowed to get out of control.

If anyone doubts that a lockdown was necessary, let me point out that since 2 November, when this lockdown started, 10,711 people have tragically died within 28 days of testing positive for covid-19. In the past week alone, that is an average of 460 deaths per day. Those are appalling numbers, and every one is a tragedy. So we can argue about why this lockdown did not happen earlier, when the infection rate was lower, as we argued for on this side of the House, but whatever view was taken of the timing, it is clear that the lockdown was necessary and has helped to reduce infections.

May I also welcome the progress on vaccines? I have nothing but admiration for our scientists and the amazing progress that has been made. This is a great moment for our scientists. I went to Oxford University the week before last, to see the vaccine group there and to see the remarkable work that it was doing, just before it announced its results. A vaccine may now be in sight, and we must do everything we can to encourage take-up and make sure that it is rolled out quickly, fairly and safely.

However, the questions before this House today are these: how can we save as many lives and livelihoods as possible until we reach the light at the end of that tunnel, and are the measures that the Prime Minister has announced today going to control the virus and provide the right support to the communities worst affected by these restrictions? Labour has supported the Government in two national lockdowns. I recognise the need for continuing restrictions and I do recognise that the tiers have been toughened, as it was obvious to everyone that the previous tiers were a one-way street to tier 3, but I am far from convinced by what the Prime Minister has said today. In particular, the economic package is nowhere near sufficient to support the communities most affected, and they have been suffering for many months.

Mr Dhesi: Will my right hon. and learned Friend give way?

Keir Starmer: I will just make some progress, and then I will come back to my hon. Friend.

I also fear that without the right health measures in place—in particular, a working trace and isolate system—there are real risks that this plan is incapable of controlling the virus this winter. I want to set that out in a bit more detail, but before I do so I will give way.

Mr Dhesi: I thank the Leader of the Opposition. Does he agree that the support for businesses, especially in tier 3, that are struggling—in the hospitality and the arts sectors specifically—is just not enough, because many of them are on the brink of collapse?

Mr Speaker: Order. We have lots of speakers, and interventions from those who are down to speak early are not fair on those later in the list. I do understand that people who are not going to speak might need to intervene, but please let us think about each other.

Keir Starmer: I do agree, and I will come on to business support in a minute, but let me make the points in support of the case we make today.

The first point is this: we have been here before. On 10 June, the Prime Minister told us for the first time of his "whack-a-mole" strategy to control local infections. He told us it would be so effective that restrictions would be for only a few weeks or even a few days. That was far from reality; Leicester, for example, has just gone into the 154th day of restrictions, and by the time these regulations run out on 2 February, Leicester will have been in restrictions for 217 days. So that 10 June proposal did not work.

Roll on to 22 September: by now, infections are rising in 19 of the 20 areas under restrictions. The Prime Minister announced new restrictions, including the rule of six. He told the House that the rule of six would

"curb the number of daily infections and reduce the reproduction rate to 1".—[*Official Report*, 22 September 2020; Vol. 680, c. 798.]

That is what he said about the rule of six. So that did not work.

Two weeks later, on 12 October, with the precise opposite happening, the Prime Minister stands up again—for the third time—and introduces a three-tier system. Again, he said that this would work: he told the House that it would deliver the reduction in the R rate locally and regionally that we needed. That did not work.

Nineteen days later—the fourth attempt now—in a hurried press conference on a Saturday, the Prime Minister announced that the tier system had failed, the virus was out of control and a national lockdown was now unavoidable.

The reason this all matters is that there is a pattern here. The Prime Minister has a record of overpromising and underdelivering—short-term decisions that then bump into the harsh reality of the virus.

And then a new plan is conjured up a few weeks later—we are now on at least the fifth plan—with an even bigger promise that never materialises. After eight months, the Prime Minister should not be surprised that we and many of the British people are far less convinced this time round.

Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con): I have a biology degree and I am going to take a wild punt that I am one of the few Members of this House to have used the word "epidemiology" in anger before January this year. We have choices to control this virus: we can have a lockdown, we can have a tiered system, or we can have no lockdown, where lives, such as those of John and Ken, family friends we have recently lost, are lost to this awful covid. Why will the right hon. and learned Gentleman and the Labour party not tonight support these measures that are saving lives?

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention and I am setting out exactly why not—and I will take interventions along the way so that what I say can be challenged—but the first point, which I have just finished making, is that we have been here before; this is at least plan no. 5 and the first four have not worked. So I think everybody would forgive the British public for being sceptical about the fifth plan.

I will go on now and set out the second point I want to make, which is that the public health risk of the Prime Minister's approach is significant. The prevalence of the virus remains high; even if the R rate is below 1, it is only just below 1, and we know that the virus is at its most deadly during the cold winter months, exactly when the NHS is under the most strain. So if we are to keep the R rate below 1 during winter and not waste the progress that has been made in the past four weeks, we need to proceed with precision and caution. But instead of levelling with the British public, the Prime Minister spent the weekend telling his Back Benchers that the plan is all about, in his words, loosening restrictions across the country, and he has been fuelling a promise that within two weeks or so local areas have a real prospect of dropping to a tier below the one they are in.

We need to level: in my view, that is highly unlikely, and we might as well face it now. It is obvious that the new tier 1 may slow but will not prevent a rise in infections, and it is far from certain that the new tier 2 can hold the rate of infection. *[Interruption.]* I hear the mutterings, but let us just see where we are in two weeks. I look across the House to Members who think that perhaps, in two weeks, their area is going to drop down a tier just before Christmas. Let us see.

Gary Sambrook (Birmingham, Northfield) (Con): Your famous hindsight.

Keir Starmer: This isn't hindsight; I am telling you what is going to happen in two weeks. We know where we will be in two weeks. I have no doubt that there will be Government Members getting up and saying, "I thought my area was going to drop a tier just before Christmas." That is not levelling—that is not being straight—because that is not going to happen. The new tier 1 may slow the rate of infection, but it will not prevent it from increasing, and tier 2 will struggle to hold the rate of infection. I hope that it does. I hope I am wrong about this, and I think that all Members hope I am wrong about it, but tier 2—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Sambrook, it is continuous; we have had it for a few weeks now. Let us have a rest today.

Keir Starmer: Tier 2, crucially, depends on all other factors falling into place at exactly the same time. Although we all welcome the chance to see our loved ones at Christmas, I am not convinced that the Government have a sufficiently robust plan in place to prevent a spike in infections over the new year.

Of course this is difficult, and all systems would have risk, but that brings me to my third point. The risks we face in the decisions we make today are much higher because the Prime Minister has failed to fix the major problems with the now £22 billion track and trace system. Before the Prime Minister simply brushes the point aside again, let me remind him and the House that one of the major reasons the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies advised a circuit break back in September was that track and trace was only having, in its words,

"a marginal impact on transmission".

The great thing that was going to control the virus was not working then. If we are to control this virus, that really matters, and the Prime Minister having his head in the sand is not helping.

I know that the Prime Minister will say, "We've made advances in testing." I recognise that, and I genuinely hope that it helps to tackle the virus, but let me quote the chief scientific officer, who said that

"testing is important, but of course it only matters if people isolate as well."

That is blindingly obvious, but only a fraction of people who should be self-isolating are doing so, and the Prime Minister still has not addressed the reasons for this, including the huge gaps in support.

I know that there has been an announcement about the change for those notified by the app—a ridiculous omission in the first place—but it does not affect basic eligibility. Only one in eight workers qualify for the one-off £500 self-isolation support. Anyone not receiving that has to rely on statutory sick pay, which is the equivalent of £13 a day. That is a huge problem that needs to be addressed. People want to do the right thing, but for many there is a real fear that self-isolation means a huge loss of income that they simply cannot afford.

I think—I cannot prove this—that one of the main reasons that people are not passing on their contacts in the way we want is that they fear that those they pass on contacts for will not be able to afford to self-isolate. That is a real problem, and we cannot carry on ignoring it.

Sir Edward Leigh: The right hon. and learned Gentleman is doing a very good job—it is his job to criticise the Government, and of course mistakes have been made—but a credible Opposition would have a plan of their own. What is the plan of the Labour party?

Mr Speaker: Order. Sir Edward, that is your second bite of the cherry; there are other people as well—please.

Keir Starmer: I will come to that. I have accepted the case for restrictions—we were very clear about the need for a circuit break; we are clear that we need to go into restrictions—but we need a scheme that works, and I am explaining what the problem is with this scheme as we go through it.

Let me stay with track and trace. We know the claims the Prime Minister made about this at the beginning of the year and in the middle of the year. On tracing, which is crucial, the latest figures show 137,000 close contacts were missed by the system in one week. That is the highest weekly figure yet. This is not a figure that is going down; it is a figure that is going up. Over 500,000 close contacts have been missed by the system in the past month. That is not a statistic. That is half a million people who should have been self-isolating, but instead of self-isolating, they were with their friends, their families and their communities—half a million people in one month. That is a huge gap in the defences. I raise this issue every week, and the Prime Minister pretends it is getting better, but it never does. The Prime Minister has almost given up on it and put mass testing in its place, but again, that is blind optimism, not a plan. The idea that we can go through the next few months and successfully keep the virus under control when 500,000 people a month are wandering round when they should be self-isolating is not a sensible plan going forward.

My fourth point is about the level of economic support that is provided. I have to say to the Prime Minister that it is hard to overstate the level of anger about this out there in our communities, many of which have been in restrictions for months on end. Yesterday, I paid a virtual visit to local businesses in the north-west. Their emotions range from deep disappointment with the Government to raw anger that the Prime Minister and Chancellor just are not listening and do not get the impact of months of endless restrictions and the impact they have had on local communities. In March, the Chancellor vowed to do "whatever it takes" to support households and businesses, but there have now been six economic plans in nine months, and the level of support is still insufficient.

For these reasons, and let me spell them out—*[Interruption.]* The Prime Minister mumbles, but let me spell them out. First, the scheme does not fairly reflect the difficulties faced by businesses across the country. *[Interruption.]* I would be surprised if Government Members are not picking that up from their constituents and businesses. Let me start with the additional restrictions grant, which gives a flat figure to local areas, regardless of how long they have been in restrictions. That means Greater Manchester, which will be on its 40th day of severe restrictions when it enters tier 3 tomorrow, has received the same one-off support as the Isle of Wight, which went into restrictions far later and will emerge tomorrow into tier 1. That is unfair, and everybody knows it is unfair, and everybody in this House is being told by their constituents and by their businesses that it is unfair, so to pretend it is not is just not real, Prime Minister.

The second aspect—*[Interruption.]* The second aspect is that the grant does not take account of the number of businesses that need support in each area. Our great cities are being asked to spread the same sum far more thinly, and that is also clearly unfair. Our constituents know it is unfair, our businesses know it is unfair, and nothing has been done about it.

The third aspect—even allowing for today's announcement on pubs, which is the definition of small beer—is that many businesses are now receiving less support than they did during the first wave. That is a huge strain for businesses, particularly those that have been so long under restrictions, and it makes no economic sense for the Government to allow them to go to the wall.

Putting the grant system to one side, the second major point about the economic support is that millions of self-employed people remain unfairly excluded from the Government support schemes. Again, nothing is being done about that. I have raised it so many times with the Prime Minister, as have others, and every time he chooses to talk about those who are within the scheme, ignoring those who are not in the scheme. It is eight months on, and we are facing another three or four months of this. That will mean 12 months without the support that is needed in those areas.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I am extremely grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman for giving way. He talks about those people who have been excluded from support. Let focus me on who those people are. They include people who set up their own businesses 18 months ago, directors of very small limited

[Tim Farron]

companies, taxi drivers, hairdressers and the like. These are the entrepreneurs we need to build Britain back as we recover from the economic wreckage of the coronavirus. Does he agree we should be investing in those people, not excluding them and leaving many of them in deep and dangerous debt?

Keir Starmer: I do agree, and their cry still has not been heard. I accept that in the process of putting together a support package in a hurry back in March, there may have been reasons why certain groups were overlooked, but this is eight months on. It has been pointed out over and over again, and here we go into a tiered system and there is still that gap in the system, and it is being very strongly felt out there.

The third point about the economic package is this: the Government must remove the uncertainty about furlough and rule out changing the scheme again in January. That is crucial, because businesses are beginning to make decisions about what to do in January. The Chancellor made this mistake before. By the time the furlough was extended, many businesses had laid people off because it came too late. We know what happens in that circumstance. The uncertainty has already caused real economic damage and we cannot afford the same mistake again. So, taken together, those points show that the business and economic support just does not stack up.

I want to make a wider point about the economic damage that this pandemic and the Government have done to our economy. Last week's autumn statement laid bare the huge and worsening economic cost of the crisis. I know there are those who say, "That is the reason to end restrictions", but the reality is that we cannot protect the economy if we lose control of the virus—that just leads to more uncertainty, more restrictions and more long-term damage to the economy. The failure to get control of the virus or take a long-term approach to shielding our economy has left the UK with the worst economic recession of the G7 and the highest death toll in Europe.

The fifth reason for scepticism about the Government's approach is this: managing and priorities. The past 48 hours have been a summary of the mistakes the Government have made in this crisis. The Prime Minister is fatally split between appeasing his Back Benchers and following the science, and he is ending up pleasing nobody. I think the Prime Minister knows that tough restrictions are now needed, but he pretends that the restrictions might not be in place for very long. He pretends that it is quite possible that everybody will be in a lower tier in two weeks' time. The reality is that tough restrictions will be needed until the vaccine is rolled out, and that may be months away. The Prime Minister will doubtless be back in a few weeks with another plan, but he does not make that case today or provide the certainty or the consistency that we need. In the past 48 hours we have had concessions, letters and promises to his MPs, not clear and reliable messaging to the public, and that is symptomatic of the problem.

Coronavirus remains a serious threat to the public's health, our economy and our way of life. We recognise the need for continued restrictions, but it is not in the national interest to vote these restrictions down today and we will allow them to pass. But it is another wasted—

The Prime Minister: Ah!

Keir Starmer: We accept the case for restrictions. We want a plan that is going to work, we are on plan 5 and this one is full of holes; we have been there so many times. So many times the Prime Minister has stood there and said, "This is the plan, this will solve the problem." This is the fifth time round and we still have a plan with holes that have been there for months. Why is track and trace still not working? Why are the gaps in the support still there? Why are those we are excluding not included? Why are those who have to self-isolate not given the support to do so? Those are huge gaps in the system and to simply vote through a plan without recognising those problems is not going to help.

I accept the case for restrictions—we will not stand in the way of these regulations; we do not want the restrictions to come off—but I am not going to stand here and pretend, as the Prime Minister does: "This is the plan that will solve it all. Vote for this and it will all be fine through to Easter." That is not going to happen and nobody should vote on that basis today.

1.38 pm

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I have to say that, although there are many points of merit in what the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) said, he has left the House and the public with the impression that he is happy for these restrictions to go through; he just will not vote for them. As for the idea that that is the kind of atmosphere the public want or that they will be encouraged to comply and co-operate when there is disagreement between the main parties on these fundamental issues that cannot be resolved in a sensible way, I think the public will be disappointed with that.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Well, there might be a different interpretation of the events just past, might there not, which is that a lot of us are very concerned that the Prime Minister does not give the full story to the House and to the nation. The truth is that we are almost certainly going to see another lockdown in January—a full lockdown across the whole of the United Kingdom. *[Interruption.]* I hear the Prime Minister say, "It is not what we want." Nobody wants any of this—of course we do not—but we have to be honest and straightforward with the British people, and these measures are not sufficient unto the day.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I did not hear my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister make the promise that the hon. Gentleman is suggesting that he made. I think my right hon. Friend is being perfectly honest with the House on this. I think it is very difficult, and I will come to that point, but I want to concentrate on what we agree about.

We all agree that we want to keep the R rate below 1, while minimising the restrictions on people's lives and limiting the economic damage. If the R rate rises above 1, it becomes much too difficult to predict or control. It has a multiplier effect, even if it remains constant. It is perfectly legitimate for colleagues on the Conservative Benches to press the Government for more clarity about why the Government believe the NHS is at risk of being overwhelmed. Data for much of the country does not suggest that at the moment, but it is not uncommon for

hospitals to become overrun during the winter months, even without the addition of covid. It is also reasonable for Government to anticipate that the rising rate of covid infections would lead to exactly that in some areas, or much worse, unless we can keep R around or below 1; and that is all that these measures can be expected to achieve.

It is right to press the Government for more analysis of the economic impact of these measures, but maybe the Government were wrong to raise the expectation that they could provide that degree of certainty where so much uncertainty exists. Equally, it must be agreed that it is impossible to predict the economic consequences of a rapid spread of the virus. I understand the frustration of representing a low-virus constituency included in a tier 2 area, and the need to provide the right support to business that is being badly hit, but such frustrations are not about alternatives to the fundamentals of this policy, which I believe the Opposition are trying to avoid.

The real question—it is also a legitimate question—is, will the tiers be enough? I hope that tier 2 will keep Essex below the R of 1, but there is doubt: tier 2 did not work before. We must look upon this period as a further period of transition to when vaccines begin to become available. We should look ahead at the challenges that the vaccine programmes will present, and give thought to how reassurance is provided that the vaccine that each person is invited to accept is right for that person. In the meantime, the challenge is to ensure that we can move down the tiers, and not just go into tier 1 but remain in tier 1, even if it takes time for the vaccines to become effective and to be rolled out at scale. That will depend on how we all behave, the example that we set, and what we do to encourage confidence and co-operation with test and trace operations.

There is much to ask the Government that time does not allow today—about how to improve trace and isolate operations, particularly at local level, and about how the community volunteer hubs could help support people who should isolate. That is vital work now.

The last thing I want is to vote for these restrictions today, but until there are better options we have no alternative, and should support them. I am sorry that Her Majesty's Opposition are trying to avoid that truth. The Government have also the opportunity to learn by continuing to listen, and to gain public confidence from that.

1.42 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): The motions before the House relate exclusively to England, but that does not mean that they do not have consequences across these islands, so it is important that the voice of the Scottish National party is heard in this debate, although in line with our long-standing practice on matters that are devolved, we will not take part in any Division this evening. I am sure that is of some assistance to the Government Whips Office.

Perhaps the first thing the Government need to consider is why they have got to such a stage. Scotland has passed similar but not identical regulations, with a far greater degree of cross-party and intra-party consensus than seems to have been managed here in Westminster. Perhaps that is because the First Minister and her Cabinet Secretaries and senior public health officials have always taken a commendably frank and honest approach with the people of Scotland about the challenges of the virus and the difficulty of the decisions that must be made.

In the summertime, the First Minister initiated a national dialogue with people across Scotland on what a road map out of the initial lockdown should and could look like. Instead of promising moonshots and world-beating systems, and that it would all be over by Christmas, the Scottish Government and the other devolved Governments have worked to take people with them, whether that is the public at large or their own Back Benchers; and we have always been clear that public health and saving lives must be the priority. Whatever the pain—and real pain is caused to the economy and livelihoods by such restrictions—that pain is as nothing to a life ended too soon, to a family or community bereaved by this dreadful disease. As always, the Scottish National party sends its deepest sympathies to all those who have lost a loved one as a result of the pandemic.

That, however, is not to minimise the impact and effects of the economic pain. I see it at first hand in Glasgow North, which thrives on the hospitality, entertainment and events sector. I will be interested to find out what the consequences will be north of the border of the Government's announcement today on support for pubs. My constituency is home to thousands of creatives, start-ups and entrepreneurs who have all been left behind, forgotten and excluded from the Chancellor's support package. We hear of the impact from the families who are genuinely terrified that the £20 universal credit uplift will not be extended beyond March, and from those on legacy benefits who have yet to see a similar uplift. And we all feel the struggle of the frontline public sector workers busting a gut to keep the services we all depend on going in the most difficult of circumstances.

On support for all those groups and for those who need to isolate, which is absolutely critical to stopping the virus, the Government have been found wanting. The Prime Minister was chuntering to the Leader of the Opposition, saying, "How do we get people to self-isolate?" Well, as he said, start by paying a decent rate of statutory sick pay. Make it affordable for people to stay at home and stay safe. Perhaps if the Government had made more effort to support those people—to support the excluded, to support families who are struggling—they would not be feeling the heat they are feeling now from their own Back Benchers.

We just need to compare that with what we have heard about in the last few days in Scotland: a £500 bonus for all NHS and social care staff. For 10 weeks, we all clapped for carers, but that was never going to be enough. This is a gesture of thanks for extraordinary service, and I really hope the Prime Minister and the Chancellor will have the decency not to levy tax on this well-deserved reward. For the families who need it most, there will be a £100 one-off payment before Christmas to households with children in receipt of free school meals and a commitment that all primary children will receive free meals—breakfast and lunch—at school all year round if the SNP is re-elected next year. That is the difference that devolution makes.

For NHS workers and families in receipt of these payments, that is not a disaster; that is a Scottish Government working for and delivering for their best interests and the interests of our society as a whole. If it

[Patrick Grady]

means that we are using our share of money that the UK Treasury has borrowed on Scotland's behalf, well, that is the point of devolution. *[Interruption.]* If the Tories do not like it—I hear some chuntering—the solution is very simple. Independence for Scotland would have meant that we could have raised our own finance on our own terms and spent it on our priorities in our own time. We certainly would not have had to wait for the south-east of England to be placed into lockdown before the furlough scheme was extended across the whole UK.

If the Prime Minister is feeling pressure from his own side today, he only has himself to blame. Real leadership is about being able to make the hard choices and being honest with people when mistakes are made, especially in a time of crisis. People do not want bluster and false hope; they want honesty, determination and empathy. The devolved Governments have always sought a four nations approach wherever possible. We have seen that agreement can be reached in the provisions being made for those who need to travel to see loved ones over Christmas. While that period of easing will be welcomed by many, all of us will have an extra responsibility to be extra vigilant to minimise risk, practise social distancing and good hand hygiene, wear face coverings and take all the other steps we have become familiar with.

That familiarity, however, cannot become complacency. The threat of the virus to overwhelm our health service and to undermine the economy, and to individual lives across the country, has not gone away. We welcome the light at the end of the tunnel as vaccines come online, but that light must be approached slowly and carefully. That is why Scotland will continue with its tier system and the difficult decisions we need until the virus is beaten. The other devolved nations are making similar decisions and Members representing England in this place have a responsibility to do likewise.

1.48 pm

Sir Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale West) (Con): May I say at the outset that I think the Prime Minister's instincts in this matter are not so different from mine, and that I recognise the difficulty and the burden that he carries? This is a difficult matter and there are difficult decisions to take.

Freedom is not an absolute, but it should be regarded as precious. There should be always the strongest possible presumption in its favour. If the Government are to take away fundamental liberties from the people whom we represent, they must demonstrate beyond question that they are acting in a way that is both proportionate and absolutely necessary. Today, I believe the Government have failed to make that compelling case. The benefit of the doubt that this House extended to Government in March and subsequently is harder to take for granted in December. Six weeks ago, many of us made the case that the curfew policy at 10 pm was not just unnecessary, but counter-productive. Today, the Government apparently agree that the 10 pm curfew makes no sense. A month ago, the Government insisted that golf, tennis, bowls and gyms were unsafe. Now it seems that they are not.

Before the second lockdown, I invited the House to consider whether Government had the right to make it illegal for people to see their children, their grandchildren or their elderly relatives, and whether Government had the right to ban collective worship or to take away the right to work to support your family. Different people—different Members of this House—will draw the line in different places, but we must all accept that these are fundamental freedoms of our constituents, and we should insist on compelling evidence before we allow them to be compromised. That is why I asked for an impact assessment a month ago, for transparent publication of the criteria that would be used to decide in which tier our constituents would be placed, but also—crucially—for the weighting that would be applied to each of those criteria.

My constituents in the borough of Trafford have been placed unfairly in tier 3 in spite of positive covid test figures that are well below the average for England. Currently, the rate is 127.7 per 100,000 and falling rapidly, but I looked in vain at the document published late yesterday for any explanation or any route being set out as to how we would reach that lower tier. There was no serious attempt in that document to provide an answer. In the absence of that serious and compelling case, I have no choice but to oppose these measures.

1.52 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I would say to the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady) that this debate is indeed about freedom, but it is also about the balance of risks and cost—the risks to life and the cost to business and families—which are both substantial and deeply worrying to every single Member of this House. It is also a debate about facts—what are the facts? We know that our debate in this country, and indeed across the world, about how to handle this epidemic is disputed by some. It is a dispute in which the truth and the uncertainty—because some of this is all about scientific uncertainty—wrestle with the plainly false. It is about the impact of that on vaccination that I want to say a few words today.

For months now, we have lived through restrictions. We have seen people die. We have seen our local businesses suffer and, from time to time, we have lifted our eyes to the horizon in the hope of glimpsing something that is a bit better. Well, something has now appeared. To use a seasonal analogy, in the dark winter sky, three new stars have appeared, and they are the three new vaccines that have been developed and are awaiting approval. As has been said, every single one of us owes an enormous debt of gratitude to the scientists and the volunteers who took part and to all the people in the NHS, local authorities, our forces and others, who, as we speak, are making preparations for the mass vaccination programme to come. But that, too, is disputed by some people, although I think it is really important that we distinguish between the conspiracy theorist anti-vaxxers on the one hand, and those who have genuine questions and concerns on the other.

It may seem incredible to every single one of us that there are people who believe those conspiracy theories, one of which, apparently, is that Governments wish to inject us all with microchips. Given the problems that there have been with handling other aspects of the epidemic, I do not think any Government in the world would have the capability to do that. It is of course complete nonsense but, more seriously, we remember the huge anxiety that was caused by the false claim that autism was caused by the MMR vaccine. That study

was eventually discredited and the doctor responsible struck off, but the damage had been done. The anti-vax conspiracy theorists are still touting their lethal wares around the internet.

The fact is that vaccination has saved millions and millions of lives since Edward Jenner developed the first successful vaccine in 1796. In the last 30 years, vaccination against polio has almost eradicated that terrible disease. There are just two countries in the world where it still exists, Pakistan and Afghanistan, and that is in part down to some people who have killed brave health workers who were only trying to save the lives of children. Therefore—I say this to the Health Secretary—anything and everything that can be done to take on those who spread falsehoods will have the full support of this House. But it is also a fact that there are people who have genuine questions and concerns. It is important that we provide as much information as possible, so that people can weigh up the facts, talk to their GPs and make a decision.

I welcome the decision that vaccination will not be compulsory—it should not be compulsory—but we should not forget that it is both a fact and the truth that the more of us who are vaccinated, the better chance we have of defeating this disease. So, subject to the regulators saying that the vaccines are safe, I for one will be queuing with my sleeve rolled up when the time comes.

1.56 pm

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): The right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) leaves me with an interesting image to start my speech.

Let us look at the facts. The Government tell us that this is all about protecting the national health service. Fine—so let us start with the hard UK numbers. The number of covid-19 patients in hospitals reached a peak of 16,612 in the UK, out of 127,000 hospital beds nationwide, a week or two ago. The number of patients in critical care beds reached a peak of 1,489, with a UK-wide capacity of at least 4,500. At the recent peak of the virus, the national health service had 13,000 free hospital beds and 18% of critical care beds free, which is significantly better than it usually is at this time of year —so, cause for concern, because of the potential growth of the virus, but not cause for panic.

The Government, without doubt, have to act, but they should do so on the basis of hard facts. Today, we are talking about what the Government think of as a localised lockdown: tiers 1, 2 and 3. However, we know from other studies, and other countries, around the world, what does and does not work. We do not have to guess—there is hard evidence. Some of the Select Committees have covered that hard evidence.

What works is very narrowly targeted interventions, with intensive testing and tracking of contacts, and highly localised lockdowns. Take Germany, which has its fair share of densely populated areas, but has a death rate one quarter of ours. The German concept of a local lockdown, perhaps at its biggest, is the city of Gütersloh, with a population of 101,000, or Warendorf, with 37,000, or one meat-packing factory, with 7,000, or even one block of flats, with 700 people. That is what they think of as a localised lockdown.

Compare that with us. We locked down Liverpool city region, 1.5 million, Greater Manchester, 2.8 million, and Yorkshire and the Humber, 4.7 million—anything but a precise lockdown. Other countries, such as South Korea and Vietnam, have used a similarly targeted approach to contain the virus, with spectacularly better results than we have achieved. South Korea has just 10 deaths per 1 million of population; Vietnam is even more successful, with about half a death per 1 million of population.

The measures will, without doubt, go through today, but I will not vote for them. When we come to vote on them next time—in early February, according to the Prime Minister—I hope that they will be massively more targeted. Restrictions on a local authority level, which is what we have now, are not enough. We must follow the example of Germany, South Korea and others by having restrictions imposed on a much smaller area. They work better, they are fairer and they cause much less economic damage.

We do not know for sure whether blanket lockdown restrictions work to suppress the virus, but we do know for sure the economic damage caused by such restrictions. The impact on people's livelihoods and even their mental health is absolutely clear. As my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady), the chairman of the 1922 committee, said, in this country we do not give up our freedoms lightly. What we need today is a policy of maximum protection for minimum damage. This policy is not it. I hope that the next iteration in February does a much better job.

2 pm

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis). I agree with him, and I will be voting against these regulations. He has persuaded me to change what I was going to say by the power of his speech. We do not have to look to Germany and Vietnam to see what it is necessary to do. We have to look at 200 years of public health in this country, which has always been done at a local level.

One of the problems with the systems that the Government have followed is that, like all Governments, they want to centralise things—they want to take control. It is not just the fact that people suffer financially and will not isolate. It is that the central system is so slow at getting the information out to people that they need to isolate that, by the time it gets there, the £22 billion or whatever we have spent on it has been wasted, and the information is useless. We have also seen evidence that Public Health England has withheld information from local public health authorities. If we want to get this right when we come back to it in two months' time, we must decentralise the expenditure and get it into local public health systems.

What I was going to say, before the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden spoke, was that there is not a way forward where people do not die in this situation. That is tragic, and everybody in this House wants to minimise the number of deaths, but we sometimes speak as though if we have the most restrictive measures, which will undoubtedly stop people contracting covid, it will be fine. It is not. The first lockdown led to people dying from cancer as cancer services were withdrawn. People did not go to hospitals, and if they did, they often did not get treatment. The number of people dying at home increased dramatically over that period. The proposals before us will lead to more of that

[Graham Stringer]

withdrawal of health services from some people. They will be extraordinarily damaging to the economy of Greater Manchester and other parts of the United Kingdom. We must remember that poverty kills. It is not just cancer and covid that kill—poverty kills. People commit suicide. Children have had their education withdrawn, and suicide rates among children are up by 40%. There is huge damage done across the board.

People say that these decisions have been informed by the science. I cannot see that. The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care appeared before the Health and Social Care and Science and Technology Committees on 24 November for our joint inquiry. When we asked him what criteria he was going to use to determine which areas went into which tier or whether there had been a cost-benefit analysis, he could not tell us. He could tell us that because Greater Manchester leaders had told him that he had got his figures wrong, in effect—he did not use the word "punish"—Greater Manchester was going to be punished for taking time to put him right on the science and the detail of what was happening there.

Mr Davis: The science is not the same as the opinion of a single scientist.

Graham Stringer: I could not agree more, and one can go all the way from the Great Barrington group to the people advising the Government. The science to send a rocket to the moon is exact. The science on epidemics is not exact. It is open to different opinions.

The Secretary of State showed his prejudice against Greater Manchester, and his proposals will wreak economic havoc on Greater Manchester. We are told, although we clearly were not present, that when the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster was making his proposals to lock down London, the Prime Minister, the ex-Mayor of London, said, "No, you can't do that. It will cost half a million jobs." That means that the Government value jobs in London over those in Manchester and elsewhere in the country.

2.5 pm

Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): On bonfire night—normally a superb family occasion—this House locked down our nation for the second time, inflicting great damage on the livelihoods, mental health and wellbeing of our constituents, all in the interests of the greater good. I reluctantly supported that lockdown but made it clear to my Whip that I would not vote for any extension unless it was made clear to me why it would be the least of all evils.

I am afraid that the document that the Government provided yesterday does little to address my concerns, and therefore does not allow me to reassure my constituents. It deals with the here and now but does not provide an analysis of the long-term impact on people's lives, nor does it explain why South Northamptonshire must be in tier 2. There is no analysis of the counterfactual—what would happen if there were no lockdown and people were given sound advice, rather than forced in law to comply.

This is my fundamental concern. We already know that compliance is a serious issue in some places and sectors. There are lots of jokes circulating about how a person can eat a substantial Scotch egg with their pint in the pub but not a bag of pork scratchings, and about how different families meeting inside a restaurant will be rebranding their party as a business gathering. In fact, they are very serious; they graphically illustrate that those with the nous and desire to get around the rules will do so, and that those who are more compliant will suffer the frustration of seeing others flouting the rules that they do not break.

I have many concerns. A constituent told me recently that she finds it unbelievable that a mixed group of tradesmen can work in an enclosed space—one is her own husband—yet she has been unable to see her daughter indoors in their spacious sitting room, even though she would of course take extra special care. How is that fair or logical?

Yesterday, I spoke to primary school headteachers, who raised their grave concern that they are on their knees working to ensure that every child can be in school but are finding other services unavailable to them, such as child psychology assessments and supervision for non-resident parents, which all seem to be available only sporadically and never in person. How is that fair or logical?

Last week, I held a meeting of my South Northants business club and talked to small businesses that are flat out trying to survive and preserve their life's work. One is a golf and hotel complex that is still unable to provide a service, unlike the big fast food chains, which can outcompete it through takeaways and deliveries. Another is a wedding events organiser with a beautiful stone barn that can seat up to 80, completely socially distanced, but its facility is for weddings and events rather than a licensed restaurant, so it cannot open. How is that fair or logical?

Then there are the long-term health implications. My great fear is that my constituents are not accessing healthcare because they do not want to bother anyone. I have spoken to GPs on my patch, and they share that fear. What will be the long-term mental health impact of this year's tsunami of loneliness, in particular for those with memory loss, for whom this isolation has been so disastrous? What about those who have had a baby in lockdown and have been isolated with virtually no face-to-face help?

I was concerned on 5 November, and I remain so today. I have some final questions for the Government. Why are we going back into the tiering system? Did the lockdown work or did it not? What are the merits of the ongoing constraints on my constituents, versus the ongoing visible costs to them? I want to support my Government and my Prime Minister in the Lobby this evening, but I cannot and will not inflict deliberate harm on my constituency unless I can see for myself that to do nothing would be worse.

2.9 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this important debate, which will have a huge impact on my Slough constituents and all those across the country who face the prospect of entering tier 3 tomorrow. Since restrictions began in March, we have all made huge sacrifices to curb the spread of the deadly virus, which, as I know from personal experience, can be devastating. We have all accepted that we have a role to play to protect those who are more vulnerable to the virus. We have all seen the impact that it has had on communities up and down

the country, especially on people who are elderly, from more disadvantaged backgrounds, or from black, Asian and minority ethnic communities.

As we leave our second national lockdown this year, we must recognise that we are where we are because the previous three-tier system did not work. Nobody wants a repeat of that. We must ensure that the new system protects lives and supports businesses, and that no area is left behind. Sadly, the proposed system does not achieve that.

Despite the excellent work of our local Slough Borough Council, public health teams and volunteers, Slough's current high weekly infection rate has placed it in a very high alert tier. It is right that, with high coronavirus numbers, stricter measures should be implemented to protect lives. However, when I checked nearby areas, I was absolutely astonished to find that Slough was a dot of red in a sea of orange tier 2s.

Despite committing to a regional approach, Slough has been made a special case, segregated from the rest of Berkshire and the wider region. That appears to be based on an arbitrary political decision and an anomaly nationwide. Areas in Essex, London and Surrey all have local authorities with comparable, if not higher, infection rates to my Slough constituency, yet similar action has not been taken in those areas.

For the tiered system to work, it must be consistently applied and based on scientific evidence, yet at a time when we need fairness, clarity and transparency, all we have is confusion and mixed messaging. That is particularly detrimental for businesses that, under normal circumstances, would be heading into the busiest period of the year. They are now faced with no clear plan or adequate support from the Government.

I have been contacted by hundreds of constituents concerned about the impact that tier 3 restrictions will have on their livelihoods without increased support. Businesses are in the dark; there are eligibility issues with the self-isolation support payment; and the support is inadequate and does not reflect business need or length of time spent in each tier.

The Government have had months to prepare for and fix the many issues that Labour Members have been consistently highlighting. In October, prior to the month-long lockdown, I called on the Prime Minister to fix our test, track and trace system, and to hand responsibility from Serco to local public health teams that know their area. Yet the Government are not listening and continue to fail us.

The budget is now at a staggering £22 billion—more than the annual budget for the police and fire services combined. We need much more funding and resources for our local public health teams. With each day of Government incompetence, lives and livelihoods are being put at risk. Despite the doubts about the new proposals, I sincerely hope that with them, and with the excellent news of a vaccine on the horizon, things will vastly improve, or else I fear that we are heading for further lockdowns in future.

2.13 pm

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): I rise to oppose this motion with some sadness, as I recognise the hugely difficult decisions that Ministers have to make, and the many successes that my right hon. Friend the Health and Social Care Secretary and his team have brought about in recent months. As the first Member from Kent to be called in the debate, however, I would be failing my constituents if I did not register a strong protest about the way that the tiers have been applied, which feels arbitrary to many people.

I should say that I do not, of course, share the views of those who think that any restrictions are unnecessary, and still less those who think this is part of some great conspiracy. I want to see a balanced and effective approach to saving lives and jobs. I reject the idea that we have to choose between lives and livelihoods—of course we will save more jobs if we control the virus as fast as possible—and it is reckless and inhumane to argue that the death of older people is something that we should just put up with.

To be as effective as possible, however, the new tiered system needs wide public consent. In the end, we are all responsible for our own actions, so I want to see a system that encourages the most people to obey the rules for the largest amount of time. I put to the Prime Minister last week the thoughts of a constituent who said that if the Government impose stupid rules, people will stop obeying the sensible rules as well. This was sadly dismissed. Since then, the national debate has moved on to how big a Scotch egg has to be to constitute a substantial meal. I rest my case. I am afraid that what we have before us today fails the test of maximising voluntary public support. To be specific, it certainly does in my constituency, where I have had the most angry emails over a weekend since the Dominic Cummings trip to Barnard Castle.

The problem for us is the sheer size of Kent and the huge disparity in rates of infection between different parts of the county. There are rural areas in the south-west of the county with very low rates, which are many miles from the areas in the north-east of the county where rates are indeed alarmingly high, and which absolutely need to be in tier 3. I am grateful to the Prime Minister for his indications earlier on this, but they are not yet quite a commitment.

I do not believe in simply whingeing, so we have suggested an alternative route to Ministers. We have said that, instead of putting an entire county or region into a particular tier, we should do it on a borough or district basis. I hope that this suggestion is being seriously considered in Government now. One advantage of this approach is that it would be more flexible for Ministers to decide to move areas between tiers, so this would give people some hope, given that only 1% of the population is in tier 1, that they might have more of their normal life restored quickly.

I have two more points. First, from my constituency point of view, what was the point of the second lockdown? The national figures are pointing in the right direction, but we entered it in tier 1 and leave it in tier 3. That is a puzzle for a successful policy, but if that is puzzling, even more so is why it seems to have worked in every part of the country except north-east Kent. Genuinely, why is that?

Secondly, I urge Ministers to spend a lot of time and effort between now and Christmas urging people to be ultra-cautious in the five-day exemption period. We seem to accept it as inevitable that there will be another spike in January because of Christmas. I very much hope that that will not happen, because if we do we will have exchanged a weekend of fun for a long winter of regret to follow.

[Damian Green]

We can now see the glimpses of normal life resuming with the vaccine and regular quick testing. For us to reach that promised land as quickly as possible, the public need to give their full assent to the new measures. I very much hope the Government will come forward with some that do secure that public assent, but these proposals, I am afraid, do not achieve that, so I will be voting against them.

2.17 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Lancashire is an awfully long way from Kent, but, as I follow the right hon. Member for Ashford (Damian Green), I can say that there are many parallels between the experiences that I have had this weekend and those he describes with his constituents. Tomorrow, my Lancaster and Fleetwood constituency, along with the whole of Lancashire, goes into tier 3 restrictions. From the outset, I want to stress that I do support necessary measures to protect public health, but those measures must have support from local communities, buy-in from local leaders and a support package for our local economies. That would mean that the regulations would be respected by local communities.

I was struck by what the right hon. Gentleman said when he paraphrased one of his constituents, which was that when the rules are stupid, why should we follow them. I feel like I have spent my weekend hearing from constituents who say that it is unfair that Lancaster and Fleetwood has been placed under tier 3 restrictions when the infection rates are far lower than those in the vast majority of London boroughs, which end up in tier 2, and lower than those in neighbouring district councils such as South Lakeland, which is in tier 2, as is the whole of Cumbria. When my constituents see an unfairness and a discrepancy in how these tiers are applied, the kickback tends to be, "Well, why should I follow them?" I have been very clear as a Member of Parliament that my constituents should follow the regulations in tier 3. I do not feel it is fair that they have been put into those restrictions, but it is important that we follow those restrictions in order to ensure that infection rates come down.

I want to set out a state of health picture. I am very grateful to the University Hospitals of Morecambe Bay NHS Foundation Trust for setting out such a clear and open picture of how my local hospitals are doing. I stress that these are running totals and not validated data. As of last night, our area has had 317 deaths since the start of the pandemic. Currently, three wards are closed at the local hospital, and bed occupancy at the Royal Lancaster Infirmary, as of last night was running at 98%.

I understand the seriousness of this health crisis and the pandemic—all this is having an impact on regular and scheduled operations as well—but the Government really must explain why they believe that these restrictions are going to be effective and fair, because right now the second wave is having a disproportionate impact on the north, particularly when it comes to local businesses. Those businesses have made clear representations to me, as a local Member of Parliament, about the fact that the £20-a-head business support grant, which is a one-off payment to local authorities, will have to stretch for the length of time we are in tier 3 restrictions. For communities such as mine in Lancashire, that money has to stretch for the same length of time as it does for, say, Cornwall, which was placed in tier 1 restrictions and had to make it last for just 28 days.

When it comes to the local economy, my constituents are quite frankly annoyed to read reports in papers such as *The Sunday Times* that London's economy was taken into consideration when the decision was made to place London in tier 2, but the economy in the north of England was not taken into consideration as one of the five factors. That stinks of one rule for the south and for London and another rule for the north. That is not the message that the Government ought to be sending if they need to bring local communities and local leaders along with them in order for the restrictions to be enforced.

Finally, I stress that in Lancashire we had cross-party consensus among everyone—from the Conservative-run county council to Labour district councils to MPs such as myself—that it would have made sense to look at Lancashire district by district rather than county-wide, given that it is such a diverse county that looks in so many directions.

2.21 pm

Adam Holloway (Gravesham) (Con): First, I pay tribute to the continued amazing performance of NHS staff and, indeed, to the Government and Kate Bingham's team for the incredible developments in respect of the vaccines.

I do not underplay the difficult and complex decisions being made by people in the Government and, of course, the terrible toll on families affected, but it seems to me that with every difficulty and milestone reached the Government are acting on largely uncontested information. It feels like there has been a serious lack of diversity of opinion, analysis and evidence when it comes to many of these restrictions. The Covid Recovery Group does not want to "let it rip"; they just ask for proper economic impact assessments.

Let us take, for example, the hospitality industry. We are talking about using an enormous amount of taxpayers' money to pay the industry not to open or to pay people not to go to work, but the payments will go nowhere near the losses that the businesses will make, and many of them will still go to the wall, despite that money. Why are we looking at not keeping them open, given the very limited evidence for closing them?

Prior to this latest lockdown, I joked with the proprietor of the Compass Alehouse in Gravesend that going into his place was like being put under his control: "Stand there, scan here, anti-bac your hands, walk along that path, sit down there" and so on—Members get the picture. The point is that the hospitality industry has spent an absolute fortune and thought long and hard about how to run establishments safely. We should be reopening well-run pubs and restaurants such as the Reliance fish bar and Bartellas in Meopham, and the authorities should be merciless in closing and fining pubs that risk NHS capacity.

I would much rather my constituents socialised in well-run venues than squeezed on to the sofa back at home with their friends. I would have thought that mixing in venues was much better than mixing at home in tiers 2 and 3. I would have thought that encouraging personal responsibility was rather better than the nuances

of how much people have to eat with their beer. As others have said, we must make sure that restrictions make sense, or we will drive down compliance.

We have to have a bit more diversity in the advice—perhaps there should be a few people with private sector experience, and perhaps even some more diverse scientific voices. I do not understand why we are using infection rates and not intensive care unit occupancy to guide policy. Why can we not move people around the country? I do not understand why we are preventing millions of people from working when we have not even made a dent in the surge capacity of the Nightingale hospitals—

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): There are no staff!

Adam Holloway: Intervene if you like.

Maria Eagle: I will. The hon. Gentleman talks about Nightingale hospitals, but there are not enough people to staff the Nightingale hospitals. We would have to take them out of the hospitals that they are trying to give some relief to. That is why they are not being used.

Adam Holloway: I thank the hon. Lady for intervening and giving me a bit more time, and that is where I would like to see money spent. I would like to see money spent on surge capacity in the NHS, rather than on paying people not to work.

You know what, like it or not, my constituents are going to be thrown into more weeks of extraordinary lockdown, and there is no possibility of this not now happening given the Opposition's decision to abstain. Well, I am going to support the Government's decision and message to comply and, indeed, our remarkable Prime Minister in particular, but I will be hard pushed to support the Government in future if there is a realistic possibility of their being forced to seek a different path. Churchill himself had a wide mix of generals and advisers.

2.25 pm

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Covid is still taking a heavy toll on the lives of our constituents, and with this job crisis and health crisis, we all want to get back to life as normal as soon as possible, so the news of the three vaccines could not be more welcome. The priority now has to be keeping people safe by ensuring that no one is left behind and businesses are supported. The science is clear: restrictions are needed to save lives and protect the NHS from being overwhelmed. That is why Liberal Democrats have backed all the previous lockdowns and the previous tiering system. However, at the same time as supporting those past restrictions, we have consistently called on Ministers to do three crucial things.

The first is to provide clarity. We need transparency and honesty in Government communications, so people understand what the rules actually are and why they must follow them, and are not just left confused and unconvinced. Conservative Members have talked about Scotch eggs and pork scratchings. I asked the Prime Minister whether he could assure people they could get tests before travelling to see their loved ones at Christmas, and he could not answer that question clearly. It is not surprising that the general public are unclear about what the Government are trying to tell them.

The second issue the Liberal Democrats have raised is that we need proper financial support for all individuals and all businesses impacted by these restrictions—especially the self-employed, the hospitality sector, the tourism sector and charities—otherwise people are excluded. The third point, which we have made time and again, is the most critical. We need a comprehensive system of test, trace and isolate so that every case of covid is identified fast and the right measures to prevent new infections are taken fast. Sadly, the Government have failed to deliver on each of those things.

Let me focus on isolation, because I do not think it has had the attention it deserves. Back in September, the Prime Minister promised that anyone on a low income who had to self-isolate would get a £500 payment so they could afford to self-isolate. What has the reality been? The money simply has not got through, and isolation rates have become dangerously low. The head of the Resolution Foundation told the Work and Pensions Committee recently that there is "almost no take-up" of this payment. Why? Because people cannot get it if they are told to self-isolate by a local contact tracer rather than a national one, and because they cannot get it if they have to stay at home because their child has been told to self-isolate. So 7,000 people who have applied for their £500 in Yorkshire and the Humber have been turned down, which is 60% of all applicants. In Oldham, it is 50%, and in Liverpool, it is 80%. Is anyone surprised that the Opposition have no confidence in this Government's ability to handle this pandemic?

I am afraid that, reluctantly, we cannot support the Government today. They have failed to set out the clear criteria for which areas are in each tier, they have failed to engage with local authorities, and they have failed to provide clear evidence to this House. The Prime Minister's proposals are arbitrary, confusing and chaotic, and we will not support them.

2.29 pm

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I find myself more able to support the Government today than I was on 5 November, and the reason for that is that last month I was concerned about the lack of a plan B and the fact that we might have to have such a thing in the event of the prospect of a third, fourth or fifth wave of this terrible virus. It seems that we are now on the brink of a game changer, in a way that perhaps we could not be confident about last month. That is important, because in the event that we can turn this around in the near future, the need for protected isolation falls away. It is for that reason that I see the logic of what the Government are attempting to do on this occasion, in a way that was eluding me ever so slightly on 5 November. The other thing that probably gets it over the line for me is that the UK appears, with what is proposed for tomorrow onwards, to be doing more or less the same as other similar jurisdictions. That is not just followership; it is important because each one of those countries, with all their experts, will have been making similar assessments and coming to broadly the same conclusions.

We saw in the leaked documents in October that our hospitals in the south-west and the midlands would have been the first to go over capacity. There is a big difference between the two, however, in that the prevalence of the disease in the midlands was much larger than in the south-west. The documents suggested that the hospitals

[Dr Andrew Murrison]

in the south-west would have been overwhelmed on 9 November and the Nightingales on 24 November. In the event, at peak, my largest hospital, the Royal United Hospital in Bath, had 70 cases, and that was on 24 November, 19 days after lockdown. That seems to vindicate the model, the action and even perhaps the broadbrush tiering approach now being proposed by the Government, apropos the point about the midlands and the south-west.

In all this, we have to understand that there is a huge margin of uncertainty. We also need to understand that the facts are changing all the time. I say to some of my colleagues that we have to accept that sometimes there is no evidence in the way that maths, physics and chemistry provide us with evidence, and that we have to deal instead with what appears to be biologically plausible. We have to look at outbreak studies, and we have to look at the application of common sense to anecdote.

I, too, am disappointed that the proposed tiering system has so little granularity. We have found, to our dismay, that the tools to do comprehensive contact tracing that would have facilitated such granularity are simply no longer there. Even Germany is now finding that to be the case. In two weeks' time, it is to be hoped that we will have been able to appraise the situation against the five points, plus the knowledge of human geography that we facilitated with the restrictive measures we put in place earlier this year, and that, where appropriate, boroughs and districts will be able to be re-tiered to the satisfaction of colleagues.

The fundamental problem is our lack of public health capacity, and that is something we need to address in the longer term, notwithstanding the positive early steps the Government have taken at pace in relation to things such as the Joint Biosecurity Centre and the National Institute for Health Protection. Finally, in agreeing with my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green), I would say that the Prime Minister is no natural Grinch, but we have to be very careful that we do not have five days of partying over Christmas only to regret it in January.

2.33 pm

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): We are in a never-ending cycle of national and localised lockdowns and restrictions that are not working. The daily death toll remains high, and hundreds continue to die every single day. Infection rates are ever-shifting, and people are seeing their sacrifices and the impact on the liberties and freedoms in the wider community not yielding the results they were promised. This Government have squandered any goodwill they had and lost the confidence of the country and many in this place. I voted for the current lockdown through gritted teeth. It was to give the Government one last attempt to get the virus under control and sort out the shambles that is test, track, trace and isolate. They have failed. Thousands of contacts continue to be missed. As a result, thousands of people continue not to isolate and the virus continues to spread. Instead, the Government have used this pandemic as an excuse to bung our taxes to their mates, reaching new levels of chumocracy.

It is clear now that the Government are void of any proper strategy. Their mixed messaging and ever-shifting rules and regulations have caused confusion, so public health measures put in place are not being given enough time to embed themselves properly into our everyday behaviour. I have repeatedly asked the Secretary of State and various Ministers what will be different this time that will mean that these new local lockdown measures will work. Each time I get the answer, "Mass testing." Yet this mass testing is now community testing, as it transpired that there is no actual plan at all about how to carry it out, and it is still not in place. The long-awaited cost-benefit analysis was poor, but we do not really need it. We can all see what is happening to the economy. We can all see the impact this is having on loneliness, mental health, poverty, and delays in cancer treatments.

I do not accept that voting against these measures today is letting the virus rip. It is saying to the Government, "Come back with something else. Come back with something better and more acceptable." We need a more sensible approach: one that allows us to live with the virus in the safest way possible, and that gives clear public health messaging; indicates how areas can move between, and in and out of, tiers; gives proper, equitable financial support to each area; protects the most vulnerable; and does not trash our economy.

I know that this is not easy for any of us, and we are grappling with a virus that, quite frankly, we still do not know enough about. But I also know that what is currently being done, and what we are about to repeat, has not worked, and I do not think will work this time. Today I will be voting against these measures because I absolutely must do what I feel is best for my wider community.

2.36 pm

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Why will you be able to buy a pint in a sports venue without getting anything to eat, but if you order a pint in a pub, you will have to have a substantial meal? I will leave that hanging as the great existential question of the day.

Suppression in anticipation of vaccination is the reason for the measures before us today, but people have been writing to me for months terrified that a vaccination will be compulsory. I have responded by saying, "Don't be so absolutely ridiculous—that could never possibly happen. We are a Conservative Government, after all." Yet now we discover that vaccination may be a passport to the acquisition of your civil liberties, without which you will have all sorts of things that you would otherwise be able to do denied to you. That would be absolutely disproportionate to a virus with a mortality rate verging on 1%. It would equally be a terrible precedent to set for other vaccines and medicines. I therefore hope that we can get away from that.

The way to persuade people to have a vaccination is, of course, to line up the entire Government and their Ministers, and their loved ones, let them have it first, and then get all the luvvies—the icons of popular culture—out on the airwaves singing its praises. Any kind of suggestion of coercion absolutely feeds the conspiracy theory that we are being cowed and our liberty is being taken away.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is not enough for the Government merely to refrain from coercing people—they also have to pay attention to implicit coercion whereby they would turn a blind eye to businesses like airlines and restaurants refusing to let people in unless they have had

the vaccination? The Government have to decide whether they are willing to allow people to discriminate on that basis.

Sir Desmond Swayne: That would be discrimination. It would be vaccinationism, which we must of course resist.

The other thing that any kind of coercion would do is set the seal on this Government's reputation as the most authoritarian since the Commonwealth of the 1650s; but it is as nothing to the enthusiasm that we have seen from the Opposition Front Bench for even more coercive and restrictive measures.

2.39 pm

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): It is hard to follow the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne). As a Northern Ireland Member, however, may I say first of all that people might ask, "What input do you have into a debate about restrictions in England?" The truth is that whatever restrictions are introduced in England tend to be replicated—and sometimes magnified—by the Health Minister in Northern Ireland. Let me give one example. In my constituency is the lovely Carnfunnock Park. I could go for a walk through it today, with a golf bag over my shoulder, but if I dodged through the hedge on to the golf course next door I would be breaking the law, because the law was introduced here that if you played golf, you would somehow kill some of the population, so you could not do it. The restrictions introduced here will have an impact in Northern Ireland.

I could live with restrictions if they actually proved effective; but if they are, why are we discussing introducing a form of lockdown for the fourth time, and hearing the same arguments—that if we do not have it the health service will be overwhelmed, the R rate will increase, the number of infections will increase and people will die? We have had lockdowns before, and yet the same factors are coming to the fore once again.

Of course, it is hard to do controlled experiments with such a virus. But the *New England Journal of Medicine* reported on an experiment that was conducted with marines, in which 2,000 were totally isolated and observed all the restrictions that we have introduced here, and another 2,000 did not, and they found no difference in infection rates. The report was not widely published because some of the science around it was contradictory.

The second reason why I am against the lockdown is its disproportionate effect on business.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does my right hon. Friend share my concern for dentists, who have followed the rules over face, hands and space and all the precautions, and for whom the R rate has kept low, and barbers and hairdressers, who have done the same thing and followed all the regulations, accepting customers by appointment only, and whose R rate is 0.05? Is it not time for those who follow the rules correctly to be rewarded, rather than prevented from operating their businesses?

Sammy Wilson: The frustration for many people is that they see their businesses being ruined by restrictions even though, first, it cannot be identified that their businesses are responsible for spreading infection, and secondly, they have taken all the precautions. The number of small businessmen and women who have sacrificed their savings, who have given their lives to building up their business, who have taken risks with their own money, only to find that their business is squeezed by the powerful hand of the state—it causes anger. It also, quite rightly, causes anger when we see people tossed out of their jobs by the same powerful hand, all on the basis that those restrictions are necessary. We need to ask ourselves whether it is significant that the Government do not want to put aside the benefits of the restrictions, given the impact that they have on the economy—and no such stark comparison is being made. The reason is, of course, that if we did, we would find that a lot of questions had to be asked.

We must also remember the many people who are suffering from diseases that could be treated and cured and whose lives could be saved. Those deaths will not be reported as part of the daily death toll that we are given every night on the BBC news. Those people equally have a right to ask questions, such as, "Why is the health service so distorted that our lives are not valued in the way that they should be?"

Thirdly, I am against these measures because I believe that the methods we have introduced have led to a huge incursion into our personal liberties. Many people have been amazed by how people have acquiesced. It has been done through Project Fear. I listened to Ministers during the debate on Brexit, in which they condemned Project Fear. Well, we now have Project Fear on steroids. There are people who are afraid to leave their houses. There are children who are worried, when their class has closed down, that either their wee friends will die or they will die. That is no way to run a democracy, and that is no kind of policy for this Parliament to support. For that reason, I shall oppose these measures tonight.

2.45 pm

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): Covid is a very serious disease, and I take it very seriously, as I do the pressures on our national health service. It is disappointing that some people, when faced with different arguments or questions, always either accuse those of us who have a different view, pretending that we want to let it rip, or present, as the Government did yesterday in their economic analysis, a counterfactual, which is doing nothing. This is not about that; it is about doing the right thing which is going to be effective.

That is why I wrote to the Prime Minister with 70 colleagues asking for as much information as we could have about the effectiveness of the measures being proposed—not just whether they are too tough, but whether they will be effective enough. They definitely come with big economic costs, and if we are to pay those economic costs and those costs to people's lives and livelihoods, I want to know that they will have the effect of suppressing the virus. We simply do not have that information. The modellers who work for SAGE are very uncertain about even the effects of tiers as a whole, let alone individual measures.

I am also concerned, having spoken to my local NHS, about pressure on the health service, but again, I ask for the modelling and forecasting about NHS capacity. That was leaked before this lockdown that we are in at the moment, but it was never published—never substantiated—and the specific forecast in that leaked information turned out to be wrong. All I ask is that

[Mr Mark Harper]

Ministers share with the House the modelling and forecasts that they have seen that have led them to come to the conclusions that they have reached, if they wish to take the House with them. Unfortunately, they have so far failed to do so.

I also want to say a word about the hospitality industry, which the Prime Minister, in his opening remarks, agreed was taking a disproportionate impact. There is very little hard evidence that covid transmission is high in those settings. If the covid-secure guidelines are to have any meaning, the Government should work with the sector to understand, if there are risks, how they can be managed.

I will give one example. In papers published at the end of last week, concerns were raised about ventilation. Two things: the Government have never discussed that with the industry subsequent to the publication of the guidance in the summer, and UKHospitality thinks that 80% of premises are up to the specifications that SAGE thinks are required. If there are issues, let us deal with them. Let those businesses open; do not just give them taxpayers' money to keep them closed.

My final point is about what happens at the vote in January. I do not think the Government have provided the information necessary to the House today to take decisions that are, by any normal measure, draconian, so I am afraid I will not be able to support them. I say to my hon. Friend the Minister that if the Government want to maximise unity both in the House and in our party at the vote in January, they need to start treating Members of Parliament properly, and they need to start sharing with Members of Parliament the information that I hope Ministers are asking for but I fear they are not. If the Government were to do that, even though these are difficult decisions and the forecasts are uncertain, I think that people would be prepared to give them the benefit of the doubt. Because they are not treating the House in that way, I am afraid, on this occasion, I am not prepared to give them the benefit of the doubt and will vote against the regulations this evening.

2.49 pm

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): The right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) is absolutely right to say that this Government have not provided the information the House requires to make a balanced judgment about the right thing to do on these regulations. I cannot vote for these regulations. My constituents are sick and tired of the way they are being treated by the Prime Minister and the Government. The Government's strategy seems to be all over the place; by all accounts, it depends on who the Prime Minister last spoke to.

Friends of the Government have made millions, while some of my constituents have had no help whatsoever and have lost their jobs, or their jobs are hanging on by a thread. Just last night, two constituents told me that they had been made redundant and another told me about their son who had lost his apprenticeship.

Of course, forgotten and excluded by this Government are the sole traders who are limited companies, self-employed people, who are getting little or no help, and hospitality, which has been sacrificed by this Government. I do not know whether it is the same in the Prime Minister's and others Ministers' constituencies, but many pubs in my constituency are very much part of the community and the culture. They and restaurants have done everything possible to make themselves covid-safe, spending many thousands of pounds. There is still no evidence to suggest that any sizeable outbreaks occur in hospitality.

Many of my constituents have gone into debt with their rent, mortgages and bills, and they have no idea how they will pay for this. Of course, that also has unintended health consequences. Children are petrified about the exams next year, because they have been in and out of school for months now.

A question that has never been properly addressed, but which I have spoken about on a number of occasions in this House, is that of the unintended health consequences. I put in a freedom of information request to my local clinical commissioning group about referrals from GPs, and the information I got back was staggering: GP referrals for first out-patient appointments for cardio dropped by 66% between September 2019 and September 2020, with gastro referrals dropping by 64%, renal medicine referrals dropping by 57% and ophthalmology referrals dropping by 68%. Those drops are just in referrals, never mind what has happened to the waiting times, where targets are being missed time and again. I have also asked the CCG for figures to let me know whether there have been excess non-covid deaths at home.

I wish briefly to mention councils, which are not getting enough support. Halton Borough Council is doing a really good job, but it will have a deficit of about £8.6 million. It needs more support, and it is important that we give more support and financial aid to councils to do more locally. Local is better and it proves to be more effective.

I also wish briefly to mention the vaccines. If, as we are hearing, these vaccines are going to be very effective, it is even more crucial that the Government get their strategy right for delivery and that we do not see a repeat of the incompetence we saw over personal protective equipment and test and trace. We need to make sure we all work together for effective take-up. Retaining people's confidence will be crucial to that, and we do not need Government incoherence. On 16 October, the Secretary of State said that a new, simpler system of alert levels would be in place, but three weeks later we went into a national lockdown. Today, we see that the Government want to put in place new regulations and restrictions, which will be reviewed again later this month.

My constituents deserve to be treated with respect and not patronised; being granted a few days of normality over Christmas by the Government as some sort of reward for their sacrifice is not on. In the real world, many people will not have an enjoyable Christmas, as they have lost their jobs and are desperately worried about their finances. I am not against restrictions in total. There have to be some restrictions, but there has to be a balance involving the economic and health consequences as well. I will be voting against these restrictions tonight.

2.53 pm

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): Let me start with some positives. I say to the Health Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), for whom I have the highest regard, that her team in the Department has done some things

phenomenally well in the past few months; I look at the work they have done in preparing this country for a substantial supply of vaccines and on testing. What they have achieved on both is far in excess of what has been achieved by any other European country. They should all be proud of that and take credit for it. They face criticisms on issues such as track and trace, but the reality is that the problems they face are exactly the same as those being faced in other countries. We just have to read the media in France, Germany and elsewhere to realise that these issues are not unique to this country, and they are not issues of some individual form of incompetence in government here. These challenges are being faced by all major nations, and the Government should always bear that in mind as they deal with the inevitable flak that flies around in such difficult times.

However—I do not say this to the Minister personally, because I have the highest regard for her, but I hope she will take this back to the Secretary of State—I want to explain to her why it is that much of what is now coming out of her Department and Public Health England, including the presentations we hear and the data we see, is now undermining our confidence in this House in the messages we are being given. That is fundamentally important when we are being asked to support measures going forward. I am not talking about now, since quite clearly the measures will get passed today, but there is another checkpoint in January, and the Government have a big task to do to win the confidence of us all at that time.

I have two particular areas of concern. The first is relates to the data we see. It is a matter of record that when we were shown the data to justify the current lockdown back at the end of October—the 4,000 deaths a day figure—that information was a long way from being accurate. Indeed, the people who authored it discredited it as being relevant for that purpose. That is one example.

The second example is that we were told about the risks to the health service and that only lockdown could sort the problem, because the tier system just was not doing enough. We now know that that was questionable, too. Almost none of the progress we have seen in hospital admissions and the death rate in the past month can be attributed to the current lockdown, because of the time spans between infection, hospitalisation, serious illness and so forth. The reality is that the data published by the Minister's Department showed hospitalisations were slowing at the start of the lockdown period.

Just yesterday, we saw figures—I saw them in my county of Surrey, and they were released nationally—that show the health service is not at capacity at the moment. The bed occupancy rates are lower than they were last year, and in my county of Surrey, only 95 out of more than 1,300 beds with oxygen are currently occupied by covid patients. These are the things that sow seeds of doubt.

Another thing that sows seeds of doubt is the reluctance of the public health world to have a balance of risk between health needs and economic needs. We see that in the treatment of the hospitality sector. Do not ask me why on earth pubs cannot open in the five days over Christmas, so that we can have a meal out at the pub, rather than a meal at home. That is one example of risk aversion. There is also the treatment of the aviation sector. We can test the whole population of Liverpool, but we will not use testing to reopen key economic routes for the country as we approach the post-Brexit world.

My message to the Government is this: they have done many things over the past few months that have been fantastic in dealing with extraordinarily difficult circumstances, but if this risk aversion continues, and if the data continues to have these question marks, how on earth can we on these Benches be relied upon to be confident in the decisions being taken?

2.57 pm

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): It seems to me, listening to the debate and to my constituents, that the Government have a problem with being trusted in this field at the moment. Much of that—I am trying to be supportive—comes from the feeling that there is not total transparency. Trust of the kind needed to impose these sorts of measures must come from utter openness and transparency. If the Government were to learn anything from the nature of these debates over the months, that is the lesson they should learn. They must be more open and more transparent.

The Government are repeatedly changing the rules in a confusing way. They seem often to be more interested in managing difficulties from their own Back Benchers than in communicating properly with the public and promoting understanding about why the measures sometimes are necessary.

I will say a little bit about the experience in Liverpool, because we were the first area into tier 3—the old tier 3; we have already got a new one starting tomorrow—where the reality is that infection rates have fallen enormously since then. Local leaders were asking for a full lockdown ahead of the tier 3 arrangements, and they embraced tier 3 happily because of what was happening. We had over 700 infections per 100,000 and our hospitals were precious close to being totally overwhelmed, and the staff in those hospitals have had to work like absolute Trojans. They are still dealing with very high levels of illness.

The reality is that the work done there and the mass testing have helped. We have seen the numbers fall from more than 700 per 100,000 to under 100 per 100,000 in Liverpool, and that is an enormous fall for which we are very grateful. It has relied on solidarity: on people in Liverpool helping each other, doing things they would not necessarily want to do for each other. It is that solidarity around the country between people and communities that has to be promoted, not "We're all right at the moment, so why should we have to have these issues?" That is what the Government need to focus on. Ensuring routine testing for all high-risk workplaces is important. More testing of the kind we have seen in Liverpool spread out across the country is tremendously important.

More also needs to be done to help to support self-isolation, because that is the real problem. One of the lessons in Liverpool is that people have not downloaded the app and they have not gone to get tested, because they feel that if they get a positive response they cannot comply. That is where we need to focus—on helping people to comply. If someone lives week by week on a wage that is only just enough to keep their head above water and food on their family's table, they will not want to see whether they are positive unless they have symptoms and absolutely have to do so. People will not go for a test on a routine basis if they are worried sick about what they would be able to do if the answer is yes and they are positive.

[Maria Eagle]

We have to focus more effort on the £500 test and trace self-isolation payment. Far too few people are getting it. It is not an entitlement and it should be. People should not have to jump through hoops at a worrying time to get it. Only one in eight are qualifying for it. Many more people are being turned down and local authorities in my area are being told that when the money they have to pay for it runs out, which it nearly has, it will not necessarily be replenished. That is not a way forward if we expect people to comply. People have to be helped to comply when they are worried sick about whether they can put food on the table for their children.

3.1 pm

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): I hate this. I hate the whole situation, as do many people in the country. We are all trying to stay positive, but it is hard. I wake up every morning feeling angry, thinking why do we have to do this? But after 10 minutes, I think, "What else can we do?" because fundamentally the disease is the same today as it was at the beginning of the year. I have seen my parents for three hours since February. I was hoping to be able to meet them for Christmas—I was longing for it—but, as with so many other families now, that cannot happen. It cannot happen because the global pandemic has fundamentally not changed.

I hear people say that excess deaths are only slightly higher than normal. I remind them that that is with a lockdown. Pressures on A&E have been reduced. Numbers out this week show that because hospitality is closed alcohol-related emergencies in A&E are down significantly. That is the point: when you are unwell, the NHS needs to be able to treat you. There has been a lot of debate this afternoon about figures, one way or the other, but the reality is that in Leeds the numbers last week were 480 per 100,000. Yesterday, they were 220 per 100,000 and today there are 200 cases per 100,000. NHS capacity, however, is at 95% to 98%. That is unchanged and that is the key. We all need to make sacrifices to ensure sick people get the healthcare they need.

The tragedy of people dying, however, cannot overshadow the tragedy of businesses dying across many sectors, not least in hospitality, especially in December, its bumper month. I am afraid that I have to say that the Prime Minister's announcement today for wet pubs is risible. It is not good enough. Many people have contacted me, including Michelle Dwan from the Victoria Hotel in Allerton Bywater. Justine Gregory of Salute at the White Swan in Rothwell, whom I am speaking to later today, contacted me very politely and said: "We've spent thousands of pounds on hygiene and cleanliness measures. Every year we rely on the significant cash boost from Christmas. I know this is a big ask from the Government that has already spent billions, but ultimately we are a viable, profitable business that the Government has closed." Please, Minister, people need more support than they are getting.

I have a huge amount of respect for the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) and I know she will feed this back, but it has not gone unnoticed on the Government Back Benches that, a little over two hours into this debate, we are on our third Minister on the Front Bench. Is the message going back clearly from the points that are being made today?

I do not believe we have any choice but to back the restrictions—if we do not, at one minute past midnight tonight there will be a free-for-all—but we have to stop playing Jeopardy by saying, "If we don't back them for the health measures there is a problem and we will think about what we are doing for businesses." The hospitality industry desperately needs our support, but if we do not back the measures and there is a free-for-all, we will be in a very difficult situation and—to use a term appropriate to the time of year—the NHS will say, "Sorry, no room at the inn," and will send people away to die at home. We need to get control ASAP. We need to stop businesses dying; we need to put them on life support. We are taking away their lifeblood, and we have not heard enough about that today. If we keep the numbers down for when the vaccine is ready, we can get our country up and running as quickly as possible, but when we do that there will be more everyday demand on the NHS, so we have to make sure covid patients are at a minimum.

I have had a huge amount of correspondence threatening me and calling me every name under the sun if I vote for these restrictions tonight, but being Member of Parliament is about taking holistic, tough decisions. It is not about hiding away and dodging leadership, as we are seeing from the Opposition; it is about saying, "We don't like it, but we have got to make these decisions." I ask my hon. Friend the Minister please to take this back to the Government: I will be voting for the restrictions tonight, but the package that has been put in place for the hospitality industry at the most profitable time of the year just is not good enough.

3.5 pm

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): I will focus my remarks about these health regulations on my constituency. Liverpool, Walton is the most deprived constituency in England. It has the highest youth unemployment in the country, and child poverty is at 40%. The effect of the pandemic and these restrictions, coming on top of 10 years of austerity and cuts, has been to push many more families over the edge and into poverty. We have had big policy announcements from the Government, but the reality for too many people has been little or no help from the Government and little hope for the future. Jobs have been lost, businesses have folded and communities have gone under.

Liverpool will move into tier 2 tomorrow if these regulations are passed. It is the first place to move into a lower tier than it was in before the lockdown. Its mass testing pilot has been impressively delivered by our local public health teams, the council and Mayor Joe Anderson, with the support of armed forces personnel. About 1,000 asymptomatic cases have been detected, and we await the scientific community's evaluation.

This was a pilot scheme, so there are lessons to learn from it. The first lesson that this House should learn is that a system delivered by local public health experts, as opposed to profiteers led by central Government, is the most effective way to deal with the virus. In the most deprived parts of the city, only 4% of people came forward at first to be tested. I have spent time listening to people locally and hearing about their experiences and what they are facing during this pandemic. They are all too aware that testing positive means losing income if they have to self-isolate. They know that the Government's eligibility criteria for the £500 payment are

far too strict, and they are right: in Liverpool, about 80% who applied were rejected. The discretionary payments, which the local council has more control over, are capped and the funding is set to run out before Christmas.

Statutory sick pay is £95.85 a week—among the lowest rates in the whole of Europe. Put simply, it is not enough to live on. If that was not bad enough, millions are not even entitled to it. Nobody should be forced to choose between protecting public health and their own financial security, but that is the choice that the Government are forcing on the poorest in society.

The Government know they are failing. They know from their own polling that only 11% of people asked to self-isolate are doing so, and it is time that they asked why. Test and trace will work only if everyone is properly supported to isolate. Does it not tell us everything we need to know that, whether it is for the self-isolation grant, the personal independence payment or universal credit, the poorest people, the disabled and the vulnerable have had to jump through humiliating, dehumanising hoops created by Tory Ministers over years to get the meagre levels of support that they are entitled to, while corporate cronies and Tory donors get to jump the queue and are put in the fast lane for covid contracts for literally billions of pounds of public money without transparency, competition or any accountability?

3.9 pm

Sir Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): In these debates, we talk about elderly people as if they were not in the room. We talk over their heads. We patronise them. We say to them, "This is being done in your name to keep you safe and, really, your view is of little interest to us." I have been contacted by many grandparents and parents who say, "Charles, not in my name. I do not want to see my children's future destroyed or my grandchildren's business destroyed. I do not want to see my son and daughter worrying about losing their home and their livelihood. I do not want to see my grandchildren arrested on the streets of London for daring to raise their voice in protest at the removal of their liberties." Old people—the people we patronise—have a view, and we should listen to it. Of course, it is not a universal view, but it is a view that is held by many.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster asked on Saturday, "How could we protect every old person?" The answer is obvious to everyone in this place: we could not protect every old person, but we could provide them with the information to make informed choices about their own safety because, funnily enough, you do not get old by being that stupid. There is a degree of wisdom in older people, and I hope to achieve that wisdom one day myself.

There is a serious point here: no Government can abolish death. It is impossible. Every year, 615,000 people die in this country, and not every death is a tragedy. It is so distressing when I hear leaders of political parties, leaders of communities and leaders in this place say that every death was a tragedy. A tragedy is when a child dies. A tragedy is when some young woman or young man dies, or when someone is cut down in their middle years. When we say it is a tragedy that someone at 80 or 90 has met their mortality, we diminish that life so well lived. We diminish the love. We diminish the way that that person was cherished and valued. Please can we change the narrative when we talk about death? Not all deaths are equal—there is the same outcome, but to compare the death of someone of 90 with the death of someone of 19 is not right.

Of course, there has been tragedy attached to the death of elderly people, and that tragedy is that in their final days and months, they have been denied the touch of the people they love. We have kept families apart for the good of an old person who is desperate to see their child and desperate to be cared for by their daughter in their final weeks and months. My plea to this place is: please can we involve older people in this discussion? They love their children and grandchildren and want to see them prosper. They want to see them have the same chances and opportunities that they had in their life.

3.13 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Yet again, we are here debating measures that restrict the freedoms of the people we represent, which I do not think any of us would have dreamt of just 12 months ago when we stood at the general election. Now this decision falls to us, so we have to balance the evidence of the threat to health and life with the threat to people's livelihoods, mental health and education. In making that choice, we must take people with us on the basis of the evidence. It is clear to me that we understand this virus better now than we ever did before, and there is more evidence now, in this debate, than ever before.

I have been contacted by many people in my constituency who do not want to throw away the gains that we have made so far in advance of the roll-out of mass testing and vaccines. NHS staff, and school and shop workers, do not want to see an increase in infection in their community, making it more difficult for them to be effective in their roles.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has been clear today that the tiers we are debating will be reviewed every two weeks. He will have my full support for that approach, rather than a continued lockdown, if—if—in return Ministers can carefully consider two things, and I know that the Minister will be listening carefully, that I believe will help us continue to take the country with us through to the end of this dreadful pandemic. I speak as one representing a constituency where infection rates have fallen by 40% since the beginning of this lockdown, and where our hospital trusts have fewer than 10% of their beds being used to care for patients with coronavirus, yet we are moving from tier 1 to tier 2.

The first issue the Government have to help us with is data. Data is our most powerful weapon, but we need to understand better what it is telling us. A data mountain has been amassed. I welcome the five-pillar approach taken by the Government, but we need a clear and agreed process to analyse it, regular analysis at a local level by our public health directors, and clear and transparent input to the decision making of Ministers. We need clearly set out roles for our directors of public health in that decision-making process, setting out local infection control actions that are being taken and the capacity of our hospitals to deal with coronavirus without impacting on other elective procedures and non-coronavirus illnesses. As Members of Parliament, we need to see that local professional leadership inputting directly to the decision-making process, getting rid of the confusion and conjecture that surround so much of the information at the moment.

[Mrs Maria Miller]

Secondly, we need to follow the human geography of the epidemic, not the blunt tool of upper-tier authority boundaries, which bear little relation to the everyday lives of the people we represent. My constituency is in Hampshire, which is 47 miles long and is the largest county in the south-east of England, with 1.3 million people, yet it is all being treated the same. Can we please look at breaking down the ways in which the country is split—perhaps in Hampshire, we can look at a north-south split—better to reflect the infection rates?

The last thing I want is to vote for the restrictions today, but we cannot throw away the gains that we have made so far. In the next two weeks, can we see from the Government a clear process to build the confidence of our constituents in the data available, and tiers that follow the human geography of the pandemic, not administrative regions? In that way, we will be better able to explain, better able to evidence decisions and better able to take people with us.

3.17 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak in this important debate.

The UK has suffered one of the worst death rates, coupled with an economic crash that is greater than that in any of our international competitors. The Government's covid approach has failed. I note the timing of the debate, just hours before the national lockdown regulations expire, in a clear tactic to pressurise MPs. It is the Government's responsibility, with their substantial majority, to secure their own policy—the Conservative Government have a majority of 80—and I do not believe that MPs, in particular Labour MPs, should be placed under pressure to facilitate this Government's agenda, when it is clearly failing our country.

Individuals, the excluded and businesses in my constituency cannot afford to pay the price for the Government's mistakes on test, track and trace, and on a tier system that is clearly not fit for purpose. The levels of Government support are not sufficient. So I will vote against what is in effect a third lockdown, particularly in my region, in the north-east.

The Government have never had a clear and consistent strategy. The Prime Minister has swung between the scientific evidence and political pressures. We have had nine months of U-turn after U-turn, eroding public confidence and trust in Government. No doubt the Prime Minister's wholehearted and uncritical defence of a special adviser breaking the covid rules has contributed to an undermining of public trust and of the public's willingness to comply with covid restrictions. Today, we heard of a last-minute £40 million bailout for pubs. That was introduced not because the Government wanted to support the industry, but as a pay-off to secure the votes of Tory rebels.

The Government could have my vote tonight with a competent and comprehensive support package for individuals and businesses in my constituency. We need to fully compensate the hospitality sector. Bars and clubs have spent thousands of pounds to be covid-secure. It is reprehensible to turn on them now and say that that expenditure was for nothing. By and large, they are not multinational or franchised businesses; they are community businesses that responded to covid in our time of need and said, "How can we help?" They cooked and delivered meals and collected food throughout the first lockdown. They stood up tall and fed children during the school holidays when the Government abandoned them.

I would like the Secretary of State or the Prime Minister to tell the Horden Labour club, the Flanders pub, Dempsey's, working men's clubs in Seaham, Murton, Shotton, Easington, Peterlee and many more that the Government will stand by them. Then I could vote for the restrictions. Can the Prime Minister tell me what the average pay-out from the £40 million announced will be? The Campaign for Pubs calculates that it is £32.26 a day to cover the catastrophic losses that pubs will suffer over the Christmas and new year period.

Until the Government change course, deliver a consistent strategy, prioritise businesses and the excluded in my constituency and my region, and support workers rather than penalising them, I cannot in good conscience vote for yet more pandemic measures based on the say-so of the Prime Minister and the Health and Social Care Secretary. I will vote against the measures in the hope that we can have more targeted measures and more trust in the Government and their approach to the pandemic.

3.22 pm

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): When I last spoke in one of these debates in September, I urged real caution about the imposition of tighter restrictions in the Tees Valley. We are all conscious of the costs of lockdown to the economy, to our public finances and, of course, to the wider physical and mental health of our constituents.

Two things, above all, concerned me. First, there was no clear route out of lockdown—that is to say, there were no consistent criteria against which areas such as mine could assess their progress. Secondly, it was a situation of potentially indefinite duration. I am glad to say that, in both regards, the situation has fundamentally changed. The Government are right to end the national lockdown tomorrow. It is a crucial feature of the system that will replace it that it is clear which metrics need to be going down for an area to move from tier 3 to tier 2, or from tier 2 to tier 1.

I will turn to the situation in the Tees Valley in a moment, but the other thing that has changed affects us all. In the last fortnight, we have received the wonderful news that we have not just one, but a range of vaccines that we know to be highly effective at stopping the spread of covid-19. We know today, in a way that we did not in September, that the long national nightmare will draw to a close in the early months of next year. We know today that we are buying time against a definite target, as opposed to simply the hope of national deliverance.

To my mind, that makes a crucial difference to the logic of a tiered set of restrictions and the balance of risk that applies to our actions over the next three to four months. I can look my constituents in the eye in a way that I struggled to do earlier in the autumn and say that this is a terrible time—my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Sir Charles Walker) put it well—with terrible sacrifices inherent in it in terms of what we are asking of our constituents, but we are now entering the final phase of the battle.

The Government will have my support today. My focus is not so much on whether tiered restrictions are the right thing, but on how we ensure that we move the Tees Valley from tier 3 to tier 2 as rapidly as possible, potentially as soon as the review date in the middle of the month. I am glad to say that the figures from the Tees Valley are now showing sustained improvement. In Middlesbrough, the number of positive cases fell by 40% in the week to last Friday, including a 25% fall among the over-60s. Pressure on South Tees NHS is easing, both in terms of covid occupancy and staff absence. The proportion of people testing positive has fallen from 13% to 8%, and, having stood at around 500 cases per 100,000, the headline rate in Middlesbrough is now 169.5 per 100,000. In Redcar and Cleveland, it is down to 140 per 100,000, so while it not was a realistic candidate for tier 2 as the system was being established, I believe that there is a very important conversation for us to be having with Ministers over the course of next week, and I will argue strongly for this if the data continues to support it.

I want to make an additional point about the merits of mass testing. I was delighted that my right hon Friend the Health Secretary referred to Redcar and Cleveland specifically in his press conference yesterday as being one of the authorities that are actively seeking a roll-out of mass testing. I believe that this is important. Alongside the emergence of a vaccine, it will go to the heart of making sure that we can get our community out of these restrictions, which are causing so much harm and suffering, as rapidly as we possibly can. My hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Jacob Young) and I are as one in saying that we want to see this happen in our area.

I also pay tribute to the fact that a new support package has been rolled out for the pub sector. There is more to be done in the forthcoming Budget, because wet-led pubs, in particular, have suffered. I will close on that note by simply saying that I think this is an ongoing conversation, reflecting the fact that, as we know, there is going to be a large piece of reconstruction on the other side of this national effort.

3.26 pm

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Streatham) (Lab): I oppose these measures not because I oppose restrictions, but because they are wholly inadequate. How can we still be getting it wrong? Once again, people will die because of the serial failures of this Government. Their record on combating coronavirus is one of abject and deadly failure. We have one of the worst per capita death tolls among advanced industrialised countries and we have one of the worst economic outcomes. There is not, and there never was, a trade-off between public health and the economy, because people are the most important factor in the economy. We cannot force people to go to pubs, bars and restaurants during a pandemic. They will not do it, but we can fully—I stress fully—support the hospitality industry and all those sectors that are struggling financially. However, this Government will not.

Research from King's College London shows that 82% of people say they have complied with the latest lockdown restrictions as strictly, or even more strictly, than they complied with those the first lockdown, but our communities are losing patience with the inconsistencies. Children can go to school but people cannot go to church. There are sporting events but not weddings. People can gather to shoot grouse but not for AA meetings. They should stay home and isolate when exposed but they could well be ineligible for support. And we wonder why people are sceptical.

I would, however say to those hon. Members who are against all measures that they are completely wrong. This is a deadly virus and its growth rate rises if left unchecked. Those areas with low infection rates can easily become tomorrow's hotspots. The decision to ease restrictions now and over the Christmas period makes infection from all these sources more likely, not less. The science now points to a third wave. Because the Government keep getting it wrong, we are in a cycle of lockdowns. Do the Government even realise how damaging this is to individuals and the economy?

There is an alternative, and that is to follow the example of other countries and aim for a zero covid strategy. There are countries, most of them in Asia, where new cases and deaths have dwindled towards zero. Melbourne has now returned to work after over 100 days of severe lockdown, but now life is getting back to normal. New Zealand, Thailand, Vietnam and others, amounting to nearly 1.5 billion people, have had some combination of strict lockdown, highly effective tracking and tracing, and well-enforced and supported isolation. We have had none of these. We have had ineffective and delayed lock-downs, a shambolic private testing and tracing system, woeful isolation measures and a pitiful economic support package from which too many are excluded. The Government cannot pin all their hopes on a vaccine. Everything must be mobilised against the virus, but they continually refuse to do that.

Before I end, I want to say that, as a London MP, I think it is fundamentally wrong that only the impact of London's economy was considered. All jobs and the economy of all our regions matter. The treatment of some of the northern constituencies has been an absolute disgrace. Why is there also no increased financial support for those in tier 3? Where is the logic in that?

I am a Back-Bench MP in Opposition with a Government who have an 80-seat majority. I have no real power here, but I do have my conscience and my vote, and I will not be conceding either to this failure of a Government today.

3.29 pm

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Many of my constituents are very angry that west Berkshire and Wokingham have been placed in tier 2 when we were in tier 1 before the national lockdown and we still have very low figures. On all the evidence that the Government say they look at—case numbers, trends in cases and available hospital capacity—there seems a very clear case that we should not be worse off as we come out of national lockdown than we were when we went in, and my constituents will expect me to reflect their anger in the way that I vote tonight.

I would far rather work with the Government, and I think that on the whole they are doing a very good job in a very difficult circumstance, but they could make life easier for themselves if they identified more policies that would both bear down on the virus problem and allow the much-needed economic recovery so that we could rescue and encourage more livelihoods.

[John Redwood]

The first policy is this: why can we not have expanded isolation capacity in the NHS to deal with covid-19, with volunteers properly backed up with all the equipment and safety protocols they need so that we free up many more of the district generals hospitals to do the general work that they need to do and free up their staff from the possibility of cross-infection and cross-contamination? One of the problems in the NHS at the moment is that there are too many staff who have had to self-isolate. Can we not do better on infection control, isolation, and specialisation? Money is no longer a problem, I am pleased to see. I am very happy for more money to go into the health service, but it must buy the staff and make sure that the staff are properly looked after, so that we have that extra capacity.

The second issue is the capacity of our hospitality industry. I encouraged the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Department of Health and Social Care to do work some time ago on safer methods of extracting air quickly from hospitality venues, so that more people can use a hospitality venue safely. I believe that some of that work has shown some fruit, and that experts agree that we can create much safer environments if we reverse overflows and extract air quickly. We are now told by the experts that the main transmission threat is aerial transmission by being in an enclosed space with people with the disease. Can we not have more public prominence for that work? Perhaps we could have some grant systems for small businesses and proper technical assistance from the Government and from those the Government retain so that more venues can trade sensibly and profitably without being threatening in any way.

Can we please also have a proper package for all the self-employed and the small business people? Why do some groups of the self-employed get omitted from the packages every time? These are the people who go the extra distance, provide the flexible service, work all the hours God made, and do not often get much reward for it. These are also the people who have suffered the most from these compulsory closures. If a person works for a large company, they are, in many cases, paid their salary, even if that company cannot operate properly, but if they work for their own business, there is no income coming in. They cannot put food on the table unless they get public support or can trade profitably. I urge the Government to look again at their totally inadequate packages for the self-employed and small businesses and understand just how much we are going to need them when we get into recovery mode proper.

My final point in the brief time allotted is that we desperately need to give people hope about livelihoods and economic growth again. We desperately need to have a full recovery programme sector by sector, including for small businesses and the self-employed, and understand that some people will need to retrain and some will need to go from the employment they have lost into self-employment. Can we not hear a lot more about this and be positive? We need to cheer the country up as well as control the virus.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Hon. Members have been very brief and well-behaved this afternoon, but we are trying to get in as many people as possible. Therefore, after the next hon. Gentleman, the time limit will be reduced to three minutes, but, with four minutes to speak, I call Alex Sobel.

3.33 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I am extremely grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for my time.

I wish to talk specifically about the impact of a tier system on the leisure and hospitality industry in Leeds, which would equally apply to other areas under tier 3. As I know is the case for most MPs, the picture in my constituency is very grim. I have spoken to many business owners who have been forced to make devastating choices, considering letting staff go or even closing with Christmas just around the corner. Support for hospitality businesses is extremely limited. The furlough scheme is due to expire in January, workers are missing out on self-isolation support payments, and there is no comprehensive hospitality support package for businesses under tiers 2 or 3. Why did we not see an extension of furlough, improvements in the self-isolation scheme and sector-specific packages today? The £1,000 that was announced for wet pubs is not even worthy of being called a sticking plaster. The fact is, the majority of businesses cannot operate on this basis, with unsustainable income and ever-increasing debt. The lack of meaningful support from the Government is a massive kick in the teeth for those who work so hard to make their businesses safe and have taken additional measures at their own expense during this latest lockdown, trying to survive what has been an apocalyptic year for hospitality.

The one-off £20 per head additional restrictions grant for councils was welcome, but I am not sure how the Government expect local authorities to stretch out the grant for as long as they are in tier 3 when some areas have been under the strictest measures for many months with no end date in sight. So, again, a new extended support package for councils should have been announced today.

I am pleased, however, that as of today the Leeds infection rate is down significantly again, with nearly all wards across the city seeing significant decreases and an R rate far lower than that of many London boroughs. With a city-wide rate now at 200 and dropping every day, the measures are working, and I want to put on record my thanks to all those in Leeds who are making huge personal sacrifices so that this can happen.

The Leeds improvement shows the need for continued restrictions. However, we simply cannot afford to lose £1.7 million-worth of Government support for each seven days spent in tier 3, which is what will happen if the Government do not step up.

We are on the verge of a vaccine roll-out, but the Government are leaving swathes of the country to fall at the final hurdle. Currently, tier 3 areas, which are predominantly northern and urban, will get no more financial support than areas in tier 1. The only way to prevent mass job losses and business closures unlike anything we have seen before is to provide urgent economic support to both businesses and workers in tier 3 areas.

So I suggest the following changes to the Government, without which I cannot support the proposed tiers tonight. The unit of geography for tiers should have as its building block the upper-tier local authority for unitaries and districts for two-tier local authorities, not

sub-regions or counties. I am also concerned that the 14-day review period is insufficiently flexible, as rates are falling fast and there could be an opportunity to get the economy going at an earlier stage, so I ask for a seven-day review period to make the system more responsive; the capacity to deliver that exists given that there will not be any negotiation. There should, too, be council engagement with Government to scale up lateral flow testing on a targeted basis, ensuring it is integrated with contact tracing and supports those who self-isolate. We will deliver this in the most effective way if it is done with councils, to ensure that we do not compromise roll-out of the vaccination and that resources are available to deliver it. I am also disappointed about communications on the tiers, with local leadership not having the opportunity to help lead communications as part of rebuilding trust and confidence.

That is what I call on the Government to do when we next have the review—it seems clear that they will not accept any of my suggestions today, although I will be delighted if the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care announces that they will in his concluding remarks. Without the additional support and additional measures I have called for I cannot support what is happening today, and therefore I will not be taking part in the vote this evening.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): There will now be a three-minute limit. I call Mark Jenkinson.

3.37 pm

Mark Jenkinson (Workington) (Con): May I start by thanking my hon. and right hon. Friends across Government for their level of engagement this weekend as I wrestled with the decision before us today? Like many colleagues, I have wrestled with the whole of Cumbria—an area of 2,600 square miles containing only 500,000 people—being lumped together as one and with the narrative in the written ministerial statement being less than helpful and seemingly at odds with my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary's comments just two days earlier.

My constituency of Workington sits entirely within the borough of Allerdale, which entered national restrictions in tier 1 and will leave those in tier 2. If we drill down into the data, however, we see that our rate as we entered those restrictions suggested that we were already in tier 2 territory or may have been in short order. The narrative also fails to set out the impact that the local outbreaks it references and the over-60s rates, in some cases 90 minutes away from my constituents, may have on our shared health infrastructure.

Since Thursday, I have met with local health leaders, who overwhelmingly asked me to support the Government in these restrictions in order to protect our local NHS. The nature of this virus means that it is not a simple calculation of empty beds. I ask the Government to take note going forward of the impact on those of us who, unavoidably, have small hospitals and rural health infrastructure shared across boroughs.

I have had many communications from constituents, ranging from threats if I support the restrictions to desperate pleas from constituents who have put their lives on hold for eight months not to throw it all away at the last hurdle as the vaccine at the finish line is in view.

I also cannot ignore the fact that if we are to control the virus, there cannot be a binary decision on tiered restrictions or no restrictions. Having fought so hard to keep gyms, hairdressers and personal care outlets open, I do not want to condemn those businesses to the same situation again. The loosening for them is welcome. Having had the discussions about the justification for and route out of restrictions, and with the Government committed to the publication of data and a meaningful review, I remain hopeful that a more localised approach can be taken.

I am happy that most of my asks to be able to support the Government have been addressed, but I have one more as I support the Government tonight. We have condemned the leisure and hospitality industry to as good as closure in tier 2, but for many, November and December make or break the year. I thank the Treasury for the support that has been forthcoming to date, but it is not enough to consider only those that are closed outright. The additional support for wet pubs is welcomed, but many other leisure and hospitality businesses are significantly impacted by those restrictions, and then there is the supply chain. I recognise the parlous state of the economy and I do not envy my right hon. Friend the Chancellor, but the loss of an entire sector has larger long-term ramifications. Necessity forces the Government's hand, but where the Government confiscate, the Government must compensate. I ask that Ministers keep this at the forefront of their discussions, but I make the point that time is running out for many of these businesses and the jobs that they support.

3.40 pm

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): I am very pleased that my constituents in Sefton Central are now in tier 2, because they were in the old tier 3. What I want to say today is that the experience of my constituents, who live in one of the six boroughs of the Liverpool city region that are in that position, leaves clues about what has worked and what has been missing.

I start by saying thank you to my constituents and the people of the city region for their hard work, their solidarity and the way they have come together to reduce the infection rate; thank you to the NHS staff in our hospitals in particular, who have reduced the number of people in hospitals with covid illness; and thank you to our council staff and to the military for administering the mass testing pilots and, in the case of the council staff, for taking on some of the responsibility for contact tracing too.

As I have said, the experience leaves clues about what has not worked as well. Mass testing is not the whole answer by any means. It is part of the reason we are now in tier 2 instead of tier 3, as is the fact that we went into tier 3 so early, but it has taken 2,000 military personnel to administer mass testing. Where are the military personnel to deliver this, whether it is called mass testing or community testing, elsewhere? That mass testing has only been in the city of Liverpool, not in the other five boroughs. My constituents have been able to access it when they have gone into Liverpool, but not in our own borough.

The experience in the poorest areas has been that the lack of financial support has stopped people self-isolating because they have not been able to. The Government

[Bill Esterson]

must address that if they want people to be able to self-isolate. The same is true of people who are self-employed, freelancers or people who run their own firms who have run out of money and have not had support since March. This must be addressed if we are to get through to the vaccine, which is really what these regulations are about—giving us a way forward.

The regulations will only work if they are supported by a proper test, trace, isolate and support regime. That must see the financial support I have mentioned, but it must also end the delays in getting the contacts from the centralised call centres to local government and feeding them back in, because at the moment that communication problem is causing delays. It is still one of the contributory factors to 500,000 people a month not being contacted. If these problems are not addressed, I am afraid we still face the bleakest of midwinters.

3.43 pm

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): At the beginning of the pandemic, we were flying blind. The number of tests we could administer—a few hundred a day in a country of 60 million—was so inadequate that we were in the chilling position of being able to monitor the speed of the spread of the disease only by counting the sick and the dying in our hospitals. It meant that only the crudest of measures could be taken to control the spread of the virus—a national lockdown. But now it is different. We can test over half a million people every day. We publish the results on a national website—so much so that many of our citizens can tell us exactly the rate of infection in their area day by day. The whole purpose of this eye-wateringly expensive system is to allow local forensically directed action and be free of crude, blind, massive-scale impositions. That is why there is such outrage in Kent. We are the biggest county by population in the country. Everyone in my borough of Tunbridge Wells knows that the level of infection is low—at around 79 per 100,000 per week, it is less than half the national average, and it is falling—yet people in Tunbridge Wells are being ordered to comply with tier 3 restrictions that are known by everyone to be completely inappropriate.

Everyone also knows that the movements in and around my constituency are within the area, across the border into East Sussex and up and down to London, with only a very small proportion going to the areas of Kent that are most affected. That means that pubs, cafés and restaurants risk being boarded up, in effect for the winter, when the level of infection in my constituency is closer to that in Cornwall and the Isle of Wight than it is to that in north Kent. Livelihoods are being damaged unnecessarily.

I call to the House's attention the letter from the excellent leader of Kent County Council, Roger Gough, who said: "It is hard, if not impossible, to justify why businesses in such areas should be subject to further perhaps irretrievable damage." He is the leader of the whole county, but he recognises the nature of the differences within the county.

There is a way out, which I put to the Prime Minister earlier. The way to resolve this situation is for the Government to commit to apply, in the review in a fortnight, the tests that they have set—the five different criteria—but apply them borough by borough. If the borough of Tunbridge Wells meets those tests, the Government should allow it to go into Christmas released from the highest tier of restrictions, which run so counter to much against the lived experience of people locally. If the Government gave that commitment today, I think my constituents would broadly welcome it.

3.46 pm

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): I commend the Government, because I know that the motivations behind the measures they are trying to adopt are worthy. They believe that these measures represent the best way forward, and I respect that point of view. They have done a great job on PPE, the acceleration of vaccine development and the rolling out of mass testing, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) just observed.

I thank the Prime Minister, his office and the Government for interacting with Back Benchers in an open and co-operative way. It is our duty as Members of Parliament to make informed decisions on behalf of our constituents and our country—to be able to say that we have chosen the best measures to save lives and jobs and to make sure that we have tax revenue for the future. It seems to me that this is not a zero-sum game: there is not just one option—the Government's option—or no option at all. That is certainly not the case; there are all sorts of alternatives.

We could take a targeted approach, as in Germany; a borough-based approach, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells suggested; or even a targeted approach based on the individual premises where there may be an outbreak. We could decide to use a strategy in which we trust people more, offering more guidance and allowing people to make up their own minds about what they are going to do. We need to look at the evidence around that kind of approach.

We could continue to conduct intensive research on whether or not hospitality does spread the virus, along with all sorts of other areas. We could look at triage at hospitals to see whether the bar should be lowered slightly or raised slightly depending on the demand for hospital beds. We could also accelerate and refine test and trace. There are plenty of alternatives.

It seems to me that we have to focus on the harms versus the benefits. Whenever any one of us makes a decision in our own daily lives—about an investment or buying a house, for example—we think about the long-lasting consequences: the costs and the benefits. When it comes to personal healthcare, we go to see a consultant, who makes it clear that there are alternative treatments and sets out the relative benefits and harms of those various treatments. When it comes to business, if one is going to make an investment, one will always do a cost-benefit analysis in the long-term. In this place, we virtually always see an economic analysis, an impact assessment or an analysis based on quality of life indicators.

When it comes to this decision, however, we do not have a cost-benefit analysis, we do not have an economic impact assessment, and we do not have a health and harms analysis based on QOLIs, so with deep regret I find it incredibly hard to back the Government today. However, I hope that in the future we will see proper health and economic impact assessments for proposed actions, as we will have a lot more actions to

consider around vaccines and testing. It is our duty to make an informed choice, but I do not feel that we are in a position to make that choice. The Government will probably have their way today, but I hope that in a few weeks' time we will assess this more carefully and perhaps make a different judgment.

3.50 pm

Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): For the first time in 10 years on a matter of policy, I will be voting against my Government tonight. That is not because I am unwilling to share responsibility for difficult decisions—I took my share in Government and I have voted for every set of covid restrictions that the Government have proposed so far—and not because I oppose a move away from nationwide restrictions towards a localised tiered structure. I do support that, but the logic of that approach is that we make the restrictions as local as we can, consistent with accurate and reliable virus data. We have that data at borough and district level, so why do we not consistently impose our restrictions at that level?

I am afraid that the Government have been heading in the opposite direction. My county of Warwickshire was assessed alone the last time tiered restrictions were imposed, but this time it has been assessed as part of a much wider area that includes Coventry and Solihull. That means that the restrictions soon to be faced by the people of Warwickshire, and even more so in south Warwickshire, are bound to be based on data less relevant to where they live. My Warwickshire colleagues—including the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), and the Vice-Chamberlain of Her Majesty's Household, my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), as members of the Government—and I have been working together to have Warwickshire considered separately again and to ensure that everything possible, including new testing, is done to control the virus. However, it is difficult to explain to our constituents why they will be waking up to tier 3 restrictions tomorrow morning. The case rate in Warwickshire was higher when we went into the November lockdown in tier 1 than it is as we come out of it into tier 3, and in my constituency in south Warwickshire it is even lower.

This is not just an inconvenience; it is profoundly damaging to hospitality businesses in particular, which will be obliged to close during the most lucrative part of the year. Let us be clear: a decision to relax restrictions at a review on 16 December would take effect only from 19 December, meaning that most, if not all, of the crucial pre-Christmas season would be lost in an area where the visitor economy is crucial. Some of the businesses I am talking about will not survive further economic damage inflicted by these tiered restrictions, which are a blunter instrument than they need or ought to be. I am being asked to support them for my constituents on the basis of either data that is out of date or data that applies to different places. This is not just a parochial point. In the management of this pandemic, it really matters that we can be sure that the Government are restricting only where they have to. If they impose restrictions when they are not justified, people are less likely to obey them when they are justified. That will make the Government's already difficult job harder and do much wider and more lasting damage.

3.53 pm

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): The people of Sedgefield respect the difficulties and challenges involved in how best to control the virus. We understand that we must look after our vulnerable, and we understand that the picture is complex. As hon. Members would anticipate, I have had representations ranging from, "We shouldn't be allowing anyone to do anything until we have a vaccine" through to "We're infringing human rights by impinging on civil liberties." We understand that this is complex. We also understand that the simpler the message, the more clarity can be delivered and therefore the more likely it is to be acted on.

Unfortunately, there are also things that we do not understand. The north-east has been grouped as a region with an edge running through the south of my constituency and all the way up to the Scottish border—a distance of 136 miles and a geographic area of 3,344 square miles. Sedgefield as a constituency has only 140 of those square miles and a population of 85,000. Its population density of 600 per square mile reflects the County Durham figures. However, we are also linked to towns such as Newcastle, which has a density of 6,100 per square mile. That is 10 times as much, and poses a very different risk. Our concern is the agglomeration of this mass. Sedgefield sits in the middle of this. It does not have a city centre. It has many rural villages and a small town. The only reasons people are leaving their communities and travelling are for work and retail, and that is the same across all tiers.

Our hospitality is primarily village pubs and a few hotels. A number of those, such as Walworth Castle, Redworth Hall, and The County in Aycliffe Village, have made representations to me. They deal almost exclusively with food and meals, with limited accommodation demand other than from workers, and need whatever opportunity Christmas spend would bring. The risk of inter-community transmission from tier 2 restrictions here would be extremely low, but we are in tier 3.

I welcome the extra support for hospitality, but we should recognise that these businesses are the lifeblood of these communities and desperately need help and to be allowed to open economically—and not just them, but their extended supply chains. I would like to see rural areas considered differently from cities when it comes to hospitality rules. I would like to see non-food venues evaluated by their risk profile, perhaps by local councils, so a wet pub or private club—be that a golf club or what was previously known as a working men's club, such as the Big Club in Newton Aycliffe—that has been able to introduce covid compliance could open. Instead, we are grouped into a mass that includes city centres with significantly higher risk profiles, and an exit is difficult to see.

Hope and optimism are the key to getting us through these winter months. The Government should enable those that can provide controlled environments to do so. We need to communicate personal responsibility, in that the rules cover a broad church and we all have to look after our friends and relatives, particularly those that are vulnerable, and we should not max out on our options.

Regionally, numbers are trending well. I support the concept of tiers, but I find it very difficult to accept the size of the regions and the current application across diverse and separate geographies. Please can we see some

[Paul Howell]

light on our journey? Can we have some hope for our collapsing hospitality trade? Please reconsider the gravity and pressure of tier 3 on these low-risk enterprises and provide signals as early as possible of any opportunity to trade. It is no good telling them on 16 December, "You can open for Christmas." No stock, no staff, no bookings—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Sorry, time is up.

3.56 pm

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) asked whether Manchester had been discriminated against, because Ministers considered the threat of 500,000 job losses in London and put it in tier 2. He seemed to be suggesting that London should have been put in a higher tier. I disagree. Frankly, Manchester and the midlands should have had the London criteria applied to them, taking account not only of medical evidence but of the risk to the economy, jobs and society.

Let us also not set up a false dichotomy between health and economic factors. We already do this. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence evaluates new treatments. It puts a value on those for each quality-adjusted life year—somewhere between £20,000 and £30,000 a year. We have seen no such analysis done with regard to the pandemic or suggested remedies.

The hon. Member for Windsor (Adam Afriyie) said that we have not had a proper impact assessment—absolutely right. Yesterday, we had a slightly odd and fairly insubstantial document produced by the Government. It does not really fit the bill; there must be some more rigorous analysis lurking somewhere in Whitehall. However, there were some nuggets in there. It refers to what is termed "economic scarring" as a result of the following:

"Deferred or cancelled investment in physical capital and lower innovation.

The destruction of valuable firm-specific capital and knowledge, due to business failures.

A loss of human capital due to sustained unemployment and changes to business models away from contact-intensive services.

Early retirement prompted by the pandemic.

Increased loss of days worked due to sick leave."

Behind all those phrases are real human tragedies.

We also ought to be quite clear that the vaccine, while it is a huge breakthrough and enormously welcome—it is important; it is a great advance—is not a panacea, certainly not for a long time. Saying that we must vote for the regulations tonight because the vaccine is just around the corner is, frankly, the mañana option, and I do not think it should be given serious consideration.

We have to move from risk avoidance, which seems to be the mark of this Government, to risk management. What we really need is a targeted approach based on robust evidence. The measures that need to be introduced, frankly, are not these. The case has not been made for these measures, and that is why I will vote against them tonight.

3.59 pm

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): My constituents have, with very few exceptions, done what was asked of them. They have made immense sacrifices, playing their part in getting infection rates down to protect our community and our hospitals, but they feel that the Government have not done their bit—they have not used the lockdown to fix test and trace. We know that public health teams can do better, but Ministers must give them the resources to deliver. The Government also have not ensured that when people are told to self-isolate, they can afford to do so. Ministers must extend eligibility for the £500 support payment to users of the NHS covid app and look again at the level of statutory sick pay.

The Government have not done enough to support businesses and their workers, especially those that still cannot reopen under the new tier 3. It cannot be right or fair that tier 3 areas get the same support as those in tiers 1 and 2, or that some self-employed workers and small businesses are still excluded from support altogether. Our cafés and restaurants, and especially our pubs, are suffering. Despite all their investment in covid-safe measures, they remain closed at what would normally be their busiest time of the year. The Government must step up and give them the help they need, or I fear that they simply will not reopen at all, and some places will lose their vital community facilities.

My constituents are deeply disappointed that, despite a huge fall in cases, Nottingham remains in tier 3. They want to know what we need to achieve to come out of tier 3 when it is reviewed on 16 December. People need to feel that the allocations are fair—and they do not—and they need clarity about what we are aiming for, rather than a constant moving of the goalposts.

We also need clarity about the restrictions themselves and the evidence on which they are based. Nottingham is home to the National Ice Centre. Our city is famous for its past Olympic champions, but it is also the training ground for the gold medallists of the future. Why are ice rinks classed as leisure and entertainment venues and forced to remain closed when other indoor sports facilities are allowed to reopen? What about tenpin bowling? The sector does not qualify for 5% VAT because HMRC says that a bowling alley is a sports facility, but unlike gyms and leisure centres, it is not permitted to open.

Bowling alleys have invested in measures to ensure that their venues are covid-secure, and they are not the only ones. Nottingham Playhouse has spent £80,000 on implementing measures to secure "See it Safely" status. The team has worked really hard to give Nottingham families their traditional panto trip, but now they are closed, even though not a single case of covid in the old tier 3 originated in a theatre. Will the Minister please rethink that restriction?

4.2 pm

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): Mr Deputy Speaker, I think I learnt from you not to let the fact that something has been said in a debate prevent me from saying it again. The same thing has been said again and again and again today, and I hope that those on the Front Bench have been listening. We want a transition from lockdown to the tier system, but it must have proper scrutiny. We have to be honest with the people, but let us also be honest about this place. Most people do not see what goes on here. Votes take place all the time, but the vote that takes place today will affect every citizen, every family and every business. The oversight that Parliament provides is so important—it is our duty—and that has not taken place this time.

We face challenging events; there is no doubt about it. Governments across the world are looking at the balance between lives and livelihoods—containing the covid-19 pandemic but also supporting the economy. I would add a third element to that: the will of the people—the consent and the buy-in of the nation to follow the rules. I am worried that the Government might lose that consent if they do not work with the country and Parliament in a stronger way. Communities want to understand why they are in a particular tier. They want to understand what they need to do on 16 December to move to a new tier, and that was not forthcoming in the documentation provided very late in the day yesterday.

In Dorset, we went into lockdown with very low numbers, and we came out of it with even lower numbers. In the last two weeks, the numbers fell by one third, yet we end up in tier 2. The number of covid patients in Dorset hospitals has gone up a little bit, but we have empty Nightingale hospitals across the country. There is an argument that they cannot be staffed. I have checked with the Ministry of Defence. There are 2,000 medical personnel ready to be MACA'd up if we request them to do so. Let us not use that as a reason to push places like Dorset into tier 2 unnecessarily.

I say this carefully, and I have stressed it from the beginning. We have a peacetime Government construct, with a Cabinet system that works well and is tried and tested, but we should have moved to a war footing. No. 10 is overwhelmed. There is not the bandwidth to cope with everything that is going on. There is covid-19, the economic intervention, Brexit, the integrated review, preparing for COP26 and then the G7 presidency as well. The people dealing with that are friends of mine, but I am afraid they are not trained in crisis management, strategic planning or emergency response. All the more reason why this place needs to do its job. Let me be the first to say—I say this cautiously—that we need to reconsider the five-day opening up over Christmas if we want to take advantage of the hard-fought gains that we have developed over the year.

4.5 pm

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The weight of opinion that has been heard today should make the Government think twice about the direction they are taking. The fact that the Prime Minister had to come here today armed with an assurance that the thing we are voting on will be changed in a couple of weeks should tell him that he has got it wrong.

Asking Members of Parliament to choose between following exactly the approach that the Government are taking and having no restrictions at all is the height of irresponsibility. A number of Government Members have said that they cannot support the Government's approach but are not advocating no restrictions at all. As I said to the Prime Minister earlier, in Chesterfield our rate is now down to 118 per 100,000. The rate in London is considerably higher than that in many areas. We are told that the Prime Minister intervened to prevent London from going into tier 3 because he did not want the economic cost, but he was happy for that economic cost to be paid by restaurateurs, pub owners, and café owners elsewhere, and all those workers whose jobs are jeopardised by this approach.

I do not believe that the Government's approach on tiers is joined up or that it enjoys public confidence. I do not believe that the public think it is fair or believe that the tier system is being done on the basis of the medical evidence; they think it is being done on the basis of the Government wanting to keep London in a different tier.

Tier 2 is focused on the hospitality sector, but there is little evidence that it is the cause of the major outbreaks. There has been too little strategy on testing and tracing in schools. We have seen care homes, hospitals and workplaces without a strategic joined-up approach. When the leader of the Liberal Democrats asked whether people who were told that they would be able to stay with elderly relatives over Christmas could get a test if they want one, we were told that they should get one only if they have symptoms.

We have a testing regime that is not fit for purpose and a tier system that does not enjoy public confidence. The support package for the hospitality sector is edging up day by day—there is another thousand quid here—but it is inadequate in the context of the losses that the sector faces over the Christmas period. The package is changing the whole time, which is a sign that Government realise that they have not got it right. What about all those other businesses that are not closed but support the hospitality sector, such as those food service companies that supply to hotels and restaurants, and the drinks providers that supply pubs? A whole array of businesses are jeopardised by the Government's approach, which is why I will not be supporting it tonight.

4.8 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): On a lighter note in a deeply serious debate, my wife had to come in for a bit of House of Commons work today and we sat down at the same table. We were immediately told by a member of your staff, Mr Deputy Speaker, to sit at separate tables. It seems that in covid Britain a person can sleep with a woman for 37 years but cannot have lunch with her.

That raises a more serious point. We do not want to return to the controls of wartime Britain. People romanticise it, but there is a deep attack on civil liberties throughout our country, and we are here to defend the civil liberties of our people. That is our primary duty.

People in West Lindsey are obviously aggravated and upset that they are now in tier 3 when they are right on the national average. Other areas in Lincolnshire have a far lower infection rate. As I said to the Prime Minister, Market Rasen, where I live, has only six per week while Newham has 40, so clearly there are injustices. There is no doubt about that and we all accept it.

I have a commitment from the Prime Minister that he wants to look at a more granular approach. With other Lincolnshire MPs, I went to see the Health Secretary yesterday. He wrote to me just now and said, "I understand the force of your arguments. I know that you made them in the best interests of your constituents, as you always have done. As I made clear in our meeting, we will formally review the data and tier allocations for all areas across England on 16 December."

So what am I to do? The fact is that this virus does not care whether an area is represented by a Labour or a Conservative MP and it does not care how we vote—all it knows is that it attacks people, particularly the frail and the elderly when they congregate together.

I am a libertarian to the core. I hate, with an absolute passion, what is happening in our country, but those who want to vote against the Government must have an

[Sir Edward Leigh]

alternative plan. I put that question to the Leader of the Opposition. He cannot answer it, although I suspect that his alternative plan is a complete and total lockdown, which we had in April, when every school closed. That is the only way in which we are going to defeat this virus entirely, so we have a compromise, and it is not ideal.

My personal philosophy is human dignity. Every time I vote in this place, it is on the issues of right to life, whether it is abortion, euthanasia or unnecessary wars. How can I vote against this measure tonight when there is no alternative plan—when the result of my vote tonight is that frail and vulnerable people will die? That would be the effect. Although it is with deep reluctance, although I am a libertarian, and although I recognise that West Lindsey has been put in tier 3, having been given that commitment by the Prime Minister, I will vote, reluctantly, with the Government tonight.

4.11 pm

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): This is a dangerous moment in the life of our country. People feel they have been pushed too far, pushed about too much, and pushed too hard; they have suffered too much. We think first, of course, of the coronavirus patients who have died and their families and friends, and the NHS staff who have cared for them, with all the mental health issues they have suffered. We think of the long-covid patients who have been squeezed out of hospital by coronavirus. Let that be understood—by coronavirus, not by lockdown. We think of businesses that were shut down by the Government and have lost custom, because of coronavirus, not lockdown, but also patients who did not attend hospital because they were afraid to do so. People have experienced alcohol and drug misuse, reduced physical activity, malnutrition, self-harm, domestic violence and suicide. One can talk to anyone in their 20s or 30s who is single and feels they have been missing out on one of the best years of their life.

Quantifying these wellbeing issues is the, I am afraid, dreary task of health economics. People like me have not just been looking for economic analysis; we have been looking for serious analysis of the harms and benefits of the Government's policies in terms of coronavirus so that we can see seriously, but bearing in mind all the factors at work, the Government's policy in the context of the right way forward. The Government's analysis should have compared, let us say, the John Snow memorandum or the Great Barrington declaration with where the Government stand. I have provided the Government with a plan that lies between them and Great Barrington. The point would be to show proportionality, the effects, the achievements that would come, and the benefits, to allow serious judgments. I have here the analysis of a QC, provided to me, where he says that the Government's analysis does not allow the test of proportionality to be answered. That leaves us with a problem, because the Government are asking us to vote on these measures not knowing whether they are proportionate.

Looking at some of the models that were provided to us, such as the DEFRA projection, Government scientists presented it to us and then would not stand over the figures, and it turns out that they were right not to do so.

Adam Afriyie: Apologies for the interruption, but I saw the so-called impact assessment and I have to say that it would not pass through the boardroom of a small business. It really was not up to it. Does my hon. Friend share that view?

Mr Baker: I do agree with my hon. Friend, who is well qualified to say that.

The hospital capacity projection from the SPI-M-O medium-term modelling, which was leaked, says that it "takes three weeks for non-pharmaceutical interventions to have any impact on hospital admissions, therefore the window to act is now"—in bold and underlined. The trouble is that drawing a vertical line on it through 21 days after 5 November, we find that three hospital trusts should have been exceeding surge capacity, including the Nightingales, and it just did not happen.

We now need to start having a serious look at modelling. I provided a paper to the Government on how to reform modelling. We also need to have a serious look at how we deal with expert advice in this complex, contested field. I have provided a paper to the Government on how to do that. I believe that we need a new public health Act that can allow us better to balance the need—the absolute need—to infringe people's civil liberties with people's fears that they are being infringed too much, again to show proportionality.

I have reached out to a judicial expert in the field, and he provided us with a one-pager, which I have given to the Government, on what should be done. I have also, by working with independent scientists, come up with that more liberal plan that stands between where the Government are and moving in the direction of a freer system. Again, that has been provided to the Government. No one can say that I or anyone working with me have not done our duty, but here we stand in a profoundly dangerous moment, heading into infringements on our liberties and on vaccination and testing that we would never normally tolerate. Therefore, I find, with huge reluctance, that I am going to have to vote no tonight, to send a message to the Government.

4.15 pm

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): In this pandemic, the Government have always been behind the curve—too slow to take the necessary decisions, too slow into lockdowns and not making the right decisions in a timely way—which has led to this terrible double whammy of one of the highest per capita death rates in the world and the largest recession in Europe. There seems to be no forward-looking strategy to get ahead of the virus and the kind of issues that we know from the modelling are going to come up. Inadequate support has been provided to those who need to be supported. Instead, we have heard vainglorious announcements about moonshots and world-beating systems, and then a failure to deliver on that kind of boosterist language; there has been hyperbole and not enough delivery.

There has been a lack of trust in the rules, not least because they keep being changed; there are eight different iterations of the furlough scheme. There is no certainty with Government support, because they cannot stop fiddling and changing it, sometimes within weeks of announcing it. That has caused uncertainty and cynicism, and it is hard not to come to the conclusion that in the Prime Minister we have the wrong person, in the wrong

place, at the wrong time. This Government need to lead by example, so Dominic Cummings should have been sacked immediately for ignoring the lockdown rules, and that would avoided an awful lot of cynicism that came in the aftermath of that terrible decision.

The Government need to reward good behaviour, not punish bad, so they need to enable isolation by paying proper sick pay and supporting those who have to isolate. The £500 payments are not adequate, and they are running out in some areas of the country, with no guarantee that they will be increased. They are barely reaching one in eight of those who have to isolate. This gives people who cannot afford to self-isolate an incentive not to download the app, not to take the tests and to hope it will be okay. The Government need to work with the grain of public requirements, necessities and behaviour, not against it.

The Government need to tell the truth, not keep the truth from us in this assessment we have had, which is full of weasel words. The Government also need to show moral leadership: stop setting up VIP lanes for Tory donors and their mates and spending £18 billion of public procurement on this. The Government need to help the 3 million excluded people, who do not want to hear that £200 billion has been spent on the economy when they have not seen any of it and are in desperate need. The Government need to be honest and up front, and then they will get support.

4.18 pm

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): We all want to see only the minimum level of restrictions necessary to keep this virus under control and to support those suffering real hardship because of the virus. I welcome the extra support for the hospitality sector that the Prime Minister set out today. There is no question but that we have to keep this virus under control. So far this year, there have been nearly 80,000 excess deaths. It would take more than four months to read out the names of all those people one after another, because this is a killer virus and it can escalate very quickly.

During the second wave in Leicestershire, the numbers of people hospitalised by coronavirus escalated very quickly, and remain above the level we saw even in the spring peak. However, after the national restrictions came in, we saw the infection rate turning around, and we are starting to see the hospitalisation rate turning around, too. The measures we took came just in time to allow life-and-death services such as cancer treatment to keep operating throughout the time we had gone through the peak. If we had waited or done nothing, doctors at our local hospitals are clear with me that those life or death services would have shut, so we took action just in time.

All developed countries have taken unprecedented measures to try to control the virus, and I am glad we are taking action earlier in our second wave than our neighbours in France. I am also glad that we have secured more access to vaccine shots than many of our neighbours, which will help us get back to normal faster next year. Things will get better next year, but with the vaccine so close now, people dying unnecessarily in the last days of the pandemic would be truly tragic. It seems to me that a tiered approach is the right one when we have the virus under control, making restrictions proportionate to the problem locally. Again, there is a contrast with France, where the Government have simply shut all restaurants until next year, and all bars are shut with no date to reopen.

Some people in this debate have supported making the areas more granular as we go through the reviews. I support that, and I want to see more rapid testing in my area to drive down the virus faster, but now that we are making progress, both nationally and locally, it would be tragic to throw that away. What is happening in Wales, where infections are now rising again, is a warning about loosening up too quickly.

There are many myths circulating at the moment. Covid is not just flu, and it is not just displacing flu. It is not the case, as some Members have claimed, that 90% of tests are false positives. In fact, the number is microscopic. Nor is it the case that those who have died would have done so anyway. In fact, a study by academics at Glasgow University suggested that on average, victims had 10 years left to live, and that is a lot. The relationship between protecting lives and helping the economy is not a simple trade-off. We can see that countries such as Sweden, which had a more liberal approach, had both a worse hit to their economy and a worse public health outcome, with more than 10 times the death rate of their near neighbours, yet we still see people online advocating that as a good way to go.

Arguably the best policy to control the virus is also the best policy to protect the economy. This has been a very tough year, but things will get better next year. Until then, we have to protect people's health and protect lives, so I am supporting the measures we are taking tonight.

4.21 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): Thanks to the hard work and dedication of everyone who lives in my constituency, we have been able to bring down the number of cases by half in the past couple of weeks. Despite those huge decreases, Tory failures to take the right action as far back as March meant it was inevitable our area would end up in tier 3 when we exited the lockdown.

The number of cases in Stockton is now nearly double the national average, and we are a long way from where we need to be. In a covid briefing last week, a Health Minister, who was clearly trying to be honest and open, said it was unlikely that our area would be brought into tier 2, even after the two-week review. I do not know what the Prime Minister's view is on that, but he must know that these tier restrictions will be with us for a while longer.

A glance at my inbox this morning revealed a multitude of emails, including from people wanting to visit their granny in a care home; on the desperation of businesses crying out for clarity and proper financial support; and on the devastating impact on young hockey players' mental health, who want their ice rink to reopen. There was an email from a family who run a small pub and who have been serving our community since 1981. They are worried they will not make it through the winter, even if we do enter tier 2, because they do not serve food. The Prime Minister's £1,000 does not, as he claimed, recognise how hard they have been hit, particularly when the average weekly profit of a wet pub in a rural area is twice that figure, and more than five times that figure in an urban area.

[Alex Cunningham]

What about the letter from the mother sick with worry for her daughter, who, when she became self-employed, set up a limited company on the advice of her accountant? She is now excluded from accessing support from the self-employment income support scheme. Hundreds of thousands of people in the same position have been demanding action since March, and still nothing. The gaps in support are stark, and many more have been pointed out in the House today. However, those gaps have been pointed out to the Government for many months, yet they still refuse to take action to close them.

Across the Tees valley, we have already lost 12,565 extra jobs since the start of the pandemic, and the Government's failure to provide full and sustained financial support to businesses in tier 3 will surely mean that more good jobs in our community will be consigned to the scrapheap. Once again, this Tory Government have failed to put in sufficient protection and support for businesses. For every job that has been announced locally over the past three years, we have lost five in the past six months. We have to look to the hospitality sector in particular, and the people who find themselves out of work, and give them the support they need. The Government have failed my constituents at every turn in this pandemic, and sadly the handling of support for those in tier 3 is just another failure to add to our tally.

4.24 pm

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): Before I make my brief remarks, I must say that I am reminded of the quote by Teddy Roosevelt, who spoke of the person in the arena. I rather feel that my hon. Friend the Minister is that person at the moment, while everybody around her carps on without any particular responsibility. My apologies to her on a personal level if I now fall into that category.

Many people have been in touch with me, as I am sure they have been in touch with us all, to advance all kinds of wild conspiracy theories that seem to abound about covid. I will have no truck with them whatsoever. There has been an outbreak of armchair epidemiologists, for sure, in the past eight months or so. There is no conspiracy. In my brief experience of it, the British state has never been competent enough to mount or organise such a conspiracy. Indeed, if it were so, in the present climate plans for that would have leaked already, so we would have been well aware of that issue. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Steve Baker: That is a very important point, amusing as it is. Those of us who have seen behind the curtain know that my hon. Friend is right not just about the British state but about every state. They do not have the competence or capability to run a conspiracy.

Mr Wragg: Absolutely right.

We are told that non-essential retail can reopen—hurrah! But I am not quite sure why we would express great surprise—

Neil O'Brien *rose—*

Mr Wragg: I will give way again, very generously.

Neil O'Brien: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. He is making light of some of these issues, which is amusing. However, there is a dangerous agenda behind some conspiracy theories. A lady was quoted in the *Daily Mail* yesterday, who, when one looks at her Facebook feed, is celebrating the burning down of Jewish-owned banks. She is presented as someone we should be listening to on public health. Does he think that is right?

Mr Wragg: Absolutely not. This has brought out the number of lunatics in the country, quite frankly.

Non-essential retail is to reopen. Why on earth was it closed in the first place? A Secretary of State beamed at us from the pages of *The Daily Telegraph* yesterday to say, "Rejoice! You can go out and shop around the clock." We express surprise that so many of our high street retailers are going into administration. I was not particularly aware that the clothes rail at Dorothy Perkins was ever a particular vector of disease. This all links with the proportionality of the proposed measures.

Leaving aside my levity in opening, I have always believed the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 would have been a far better vehicle for implementing measures. We have talked about this huge statutory instrument before us, and some of us have said that we are going to withhold our votes or vote against on the basis that we wish we could amend it. Well, we could amend it if it was done under the Civil Contingencies Act. Perhaps that is the reason why it was not used. That Act, of course, contains a 30-day review period, as opposed to a six-month period under the Coronavirus Act 2020. The Government have nothing to fear from greater scrutiny. Greater scrutiny leads to better government, and it should be accepted as it is proposed.

To come on to parochial matters relating to my own constituency and tiering decisions—and given to sound like a broken record, what we have heard this afternoon so far—I strongly contend that Stockport should not be re-entering tier 3. It was in tier 3 before the lockdown, but it should more charitably be placed in tier 2, because its levels of covid per 100,000 population are now below that of Cheshire to its south, which was put into tier 2 last week.

Briefly, I am concerned about decision making and the so-called gold command. If one believes what one reads in *The Sunday Times*—sometimes a leap of faith in itself, but on this occasion I am minded to believe it—the decision on tiering for London was taken on the basis of 50,000 jobs being under threat if it was placed into tier 2, as opposed to 500,000 jobs if it was placed into tier 3. My constituents deserve exactly that consideration as well. I do not believe entirely in the north-south divide—a conspiracy theory that abounds in this House—but when we have such decisions, we cannot but wonder whether it might be true.

The Select Committee on Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs, which I have the pleasure of chairing, wrote to the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster last week to ask for further evidence on the five tests. My concern is that the fifth of those tests— pressure on the NHS, including current and projected occupancy—will trump all other considerations. The data and information on that are not freely available, however, and no answer has yet been received to that letter.

If the measures are arbitrary and there is no exact science behind them, I would sooner the Government admitted that, because at least it would be an honest approach. As they have not done so, I cannot support these measures this evening.

4.29 pm

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): My constituency has been placed in tier 3 restrictions along with the rest of the north-east. Although I was disappointed by that decision, I can accept the need for the measures to protect public health. However, I cannot accept the lack of support from the Government, the regional inequality of the restrictions and the complete lack of an exit plan.

The support currently offered to businesses is simply nowhere near enough to protect our local economies: £20 a head in business support for the duration of tier 3 will be of little comfort to businesses in the north-east which have been under increased measures longer than most other areas. Without genuine support, businesses will go under, jobs will be lost and people will be pushed further into poverty. Covid-19 is a great threat to public health, but there is no greater cause of illness than poverty. To place the north-east in tier 3 without genuine support for workers and businesses is to condemn thousands to poorer health and worse life chances. To support that would be to abandon my responsibility to my constituents.

In addition, the Government have repeatedly refused to fund local contact tracing properly. It is far more successful and cost-effective than the Government's shambolic centralised system, which has mainly served to help to line the pockets of the Government's friends in the City. Without a functioning test and trace system, a cycle of lockdowns is inevitable until a vaccine can be properly rolled out. The Government have had eight months to sort that and they have failed. They desperately need to step up.

The Government advocate a regionalised approach to covid-19 restrictions, yet insist on dictating restrictions to local authorities, ignoring their advice on contact tracing and withholding the necessary funding. If the Prime Minister wants a regionalised system, he needs actually to support our regions.

My constituents want to know how we can reach tier 2. Local authorities need to know what the infection rate targets are and how the Government will support them to bring them down. Currently, that is as clear as mud. Unfortunately, as the Government do not have a plan B, hon. Members must choose between inadequate restrictions and no restrictions at all. These measures will hurt our communities, yet we also know the damage that the virus will cause if left unchecked. In their current state, the restrictions would be deeply damaging to Durham, and the financial support is not there to mitigate that.

If the Prime Minister wanted Labour Members to vote for the measures, he should have presented something that we could actually vote for. It is not the Opposition's job to vote for bad legislation or to pass the Government's business. I urge the Government to give businesses and workers the support that they desperately need, to fix track and trace, and to start treating the north fairly.

4.33 pm

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): It is rather apposite that we are having this debate on World AIDS Day; many hon. Members are wearing its symbol. We should consider what we did in the 1980s, when AIDS was the pandemic and the risks were very much there: we told people to change their behaviour and we had very strict messaging, but we did not take away liberties, fine people or close down the pubs that were obviously places where future infections may have started.

Today, Thanet District Council in my constituency has a very high level of covid-19 of 448 per 100,000, which is in the top five in the country. I understand that the Government are having to make some tough decisions to buy time to bridge to a vaccine, but we need some honesty about how rapidly it will come. *The Daily Telegraph* is chirruping away that it is coming, but it is not quite in sight yet.

We are waiting for the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency to approve the vaccines. It will then be a large logistical exercise to roll out 66 million vaccines, times two, in a period of time when, currently, the NHS manages to roll out 15 million seasonal flu vaccines every year over four months. It will be a major undertaking and it will take time. The Government need to lay out very honestly that we will be living with this virus for some time to come.

It is to the great credit of the Government that we have a massive amount of testing and that we have granular regional data on the level of infection per 100,000. That is the most powerful tool that the Government have. That is the driver of good behaviour—when people see that their infection levels are higher, they innately do something more sensible. We are, however, subject to short-termism and to the precautionary principle, which has perhaps infested our lives too much.

We have to ask: what about personal liberties? We have not heard much about them this afternoon. Yesterday, I had an email that touched me particularly. In September, a chap had sent me a photo of his father in an old people's home. He was not unwell, but frail—he looked bright and well, and had that sparkle in his eyes still. The son sent me another photo yesterday. There is nothing wrong with the man. Nothing has changed; there are no more health conditions, but he looked broken. That is the worry. We are breaking older people where there is nothing left to live for. Are we assessing all the health outcomes properly?

Obviously, we want to put more money towards those in hospitality, but surely it is better to get them covid-ready, so they can open again—they do not want the money. It is easy to give the Government the benefit of the doubt, but they need to be at a higher level than that. Tonight, I cannot support them.

4.36 pm

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Yesterday, I received an email from Alison, who runs the Bears Paw pub in the Frodsham part of my constituency, the town where I live. That historic pub is at the heart of the community. The family and staff work hard. It has great food, a good atmosphere—in usual times—and very good beer. It is a great place to go to watch the football.

Like many pubs in my constituency, the Bears Paw has introduced every covid-secure measure under the sun to keep customers, staff and, importantly, the community safe. Those at the pub have sacrificed so much for the greater good. They have given to and supported local food banks, and helped schoolchildren when they needed support with school lunches. Collectively, they have done their bit to help curtail the spread of the virus. Infections and, I hope, death rates are now coming down in the Cheshire area. I looked at the figures today,

[Mike Amesbury]

and for Cheshire West and Chester there are 100 infections per 100,000. The hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) referred to Stockport, which is at 155 per 100,000—again, progress right across the patch.

As someone who grew up in a pub, I know how much the Christmas trade means to pubs and, importantly, as has been mentioned across the Chamber, to the supply chain, such as breweries. I have Chapter Brewing on the edge of my constituency. I have lost count of how many variations of business support packages have been shaped so far, always at the last minute, which makes life and business planning incredibly difficult in our communities up and down the country. If our hospitality sector is to survive, including small breweries such as Chapter, it will need more support in tier 2 and tier 3 areas. Scotch eggs, plates of chips and £32.50 a day will not save the day, the week or that lost year.

Along with Opposition Members, and others, I cannot support the measures before the House. I hope that that acts as a clarion call from constituencies right across the land. We need more targeted support for our communities, and we certainly need—I keep asking for this—test and trace facilities in our local authorities to get things working, and quickly.

4.39 pm

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): It is a great privilege to speak in this debate and to follow the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury), because this debate shows what a challenging, difficult decision many Members have to make tonight. I have listened to many of the contributions, and many have portrayed a choice between lives and livelihoods. As constituency MPs, however, we all know that behind that are stories of personal tragedy, sadness and death, and of people struggling to keep businesses running and of jobs being lost. We face a challenging decision this evening. My right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) said a few moments ago that—it is particularly the case when we get to the 50th speaker in the debate—much of what he would say had already been said. I apologise to friends and colleagues, because some of the things that I shall say have already been said.

Last time we debated this issue, I said to the Secretary of State that I hoped that if we gave the Government the chance to put national restrictions in place, the time would be used wisely. There have been some really impressive successes and I think the same applies tonight. If I use my vote tonight to ensure that the Government can put these tier restrictions in place, my ask of the Government is that they treat us as colleagues and make progress during that period.

These points have been reiterated several times, but they are my three key asks. First, the Government should trust us with the data. Yesterday, a cut-and-paste document was produced. Paragraph 3.20, on the economic impact, said that it is

"not possible to know with any degree of"

certainty about forecasts, and yet we learn this morning from a leak that there is a document with better forecasts in it. Will the Minister give a guarantee to the House tonight that we will be able to see that data, so that in future we can make more informed decisions?

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) said, we need sensible decisions. I feel a bit like a pariah as a London Member in the House being told that there are regional inequalities and that London is getting the benefit of all of it. I can tell the House as a London MP that most of my constituents do not think that the decisions being made on tiering reflect either the economic or the health realities in their borough. I ask yet again that the Minister take it back to the Prime Minister that we want to see these decisions being made borough by borough, on a more localised basis, because mass testing will now allow that.

Finally, so that we do not have the Christmas docu-drama of "The Case of the Scotch Egg", can we ensure that the hospitality industry is governed not by behavioural scientists, but by reality? We want it to be there to enjoy that drink when the vaccine kicks in next year.

4.42 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): In the north-east, we had been under restrictions for some time prior to the national lockdown, particularly in Northumberland, Durham and Tyne and Wear. We have been tackling the problems in a proactive way, with local authority leaders coming together to see that we reduce the rate of infections. We were plateauing before lockdown, but it has been hard—hard for constituents not able to meet family and friends or to see their relatives in residential care; hard for businesses that have seen their trade or business reduced; and hard for those who have been excluded from support through the job retention or self-employment support schemes and who are facing dire straits.

Nothing that I say today will be a surprise, as I have been banging on about this for the last couple of months at every possible opportunity, but just to go over it again, we need effective local test and trace. We needed it weeks ago and we need it still. It could have helped us to reduce the spread of covid-19 so much more effectively and get out sooner. We need real, effective support for those who may have to isolate but do not qualify for the £500 isolation payment or, indeed, any other payment—any sick pay. It is absolutely essential to stopping the spread of covid-19, and we have to give real, realistic support to our local businesses, which have already been hit so much more than in many other regions. It is their busiest time of the year and they are not able to trade. The money announced today, they tell me, does not go near addressing their losses at what would normally be the busiest time of the year, so I ask the Government to look yet again at that support and help those businesses.

Covid-19 hits hardest those communities who already suffer from health inequalities—communities like those in the north-east, communities like those in my constituency. We have been hit hard by this virus and hit hard by the lockdown. The impact on our local communities has been severe. Those concerns must be addressed. We have to learn that we must restore the funding to public health services to make sure that this does not happen again and that public health is able to respond effectively. My constituents and those across the north-east deserve no less.

A lot of my constituents are asking questions about why London is in tier 2 and we are in tier 3, and they perceive that they are being treated differently, so it is really important that the Government undertake to review these figures weekly, rather than every two weeks.

4.45 pm

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): I want to start by thanking the Prime Minister for steadfastly battling to get us through this crisis. Anyone in his position would have no option but to take the measures he is proposing today, and he has my support.

Each and every one of us in this place cares passionately about the lives and livelihoods of our constituents, and in a liberal democracy such as ours, it is right for MPs to challenge accepted narratives, explore alternative perspectives, examine the facts and seek to form an opinion. In so doing, we are serving our country and our constituents, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker). It is our right and our duty to engage in critical thought and to come to different conclusions, and then feel free to speak in this place.

Throughout lockdown, it has been a repeated assertion about those who question the science and refer to the terrible costs of lockdown and its impact on our communities that, "They just want to let the virus rip, kill granny, prioritise profit," and about those who want the hardest possible lockdown, "They're the good, responsible people who care about lives." This has become a divisive narrative, which is inhibiting proper debate. We must be free to take different perspectives, and we must not demean those who do. It is incumbent upon all of us to ensure that this place is a bastion of free speech. Whatever other freedoms covid has taken from us, we should not let it take that.

The state has sought to control the minutiae of our daily lives with the arbitrary, the capricious and the prescriptive—whether we can eat chips or beer, or who should cook the turkey at Christmas. The more arbitrary the rules, the more inured people become to rule breaking, and when it comes to the really important rules, such as isolating when we get a positive test, these rules too become much easier to break. If the Prime Minister were not such a libertarian and if he were not the freedom-loving man I know him to be, I too would find it very hard to support these measures this evening, but I firmly believe that anyone in the Prime Minister's shoes would have no option but to bring forward these proposals.

I would just caution the Minister, for whom I have huge admiration: please can we show some humility? We are not going to be getting everything right. We are doing our best. We are doing everything we can to get the country through this time. Our constituents understand that, and it does not diminish our standing to show some humility. It shows our humanity. I should be grateful to her if she would take that back to her Department. This is a new science and we do not have all the answers.

4.48 pm

Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab): My city, Coventry, has made enormous sacrifices as this invisible disease has turned our entire world upside down, and I would just like to pay tribute to all those who have lost loved ones during this difficult time.

Since the beginning of this pandemic, I have persistently reminded this Government of the Chancellor's promise in March to do "whatever it takes" to support people out of the crisis. Instead, last week, the Government exacerbated the economic crisis in communities such as mine by putting Coventry in tier 3 and announcing a spending review that fell unacceptably short. Key workers will have their pay frozen. There will be cuts in universal credit. Our NHS, police and schools will be completely underfunded. There are no plans for jobs and no plans to upgrade skills. Hard-working people will be hammered by a council tax bombshell handed down by the Government.

I have been contacted by countless small businesses and self-employed people, understandably heartbroken by the Government's decision. They include pub owner Libby Payne, whose own pub, the Aardvark, in my constituency has felt the weight of lockdown. She has always operated in covid-safe ways, within the guidelines, and she has never had a customer question her practices. She describes her business as her "customers' living room," and many of her customers unfortunately now live alone in isolation, unable to see the people they class as family. Libby has had zero cases linked to her business, yet she feels penalised—all because her postcode is in Coventry, not London. That is exactly what is happening to our pubs up and down the country, which we all regard as the heart of all our communities.

I cannot in good conscience actively support a tiered system that, although intended to protect my community and protect lives, deprives my constituents of the chance to see loved ones in the run-up to Christmas, adversely impacts my constituents' mental and physical health, cripples my local economy and starves the livelihoods of both men and women who have done nothing but the right thing since the beginning of the pandemic, yet have had their sacrifices routinely overlooked by the Government.

All these measures are due to pass today, and I urge the Government to review the allocation of the tier system on a sub-regional level. I am glad that the Prime Minister said he was considering that, but it is a rather long time to wait until February. In the meantime, I would ask the Government to implement mass lateral flow testing, provide the support that our public services need, provide the financial support that our businesses and my constituents need, and reverse the council tax bombshell on my very hard-working residents.

4.51 pm

Edward Timpson (Eddisbury) (Con): When I spoke in the debate on 5 November to determine the lockdown that we are about to emerge from, I said that we needed a plan to enable us to live with the covid-19 virus in the longer term and keep the R rate below 1 once we had reduced it, so that we could continue to reopen the economy and, most of all, give Eddisbury residents and businesses the normality, certainty and hope that they crave. The good news is that since then we have got R below 1 and there is real hope, in the form of viable vaccines having into view. However, as the Prime Minister often and rightly reminds us, we are not there yet—nobody is. So that plan is still needed.

To that end, when looking at any realistic alternatives that are likely, in my view, to lead to intermittent lockdowns, there is logic to a tiered approach that best reflects the most effective restrictions for each particular tier. The question is, however, whether we are confident that the measures proposed, and the geography and proportion in which they pertain, are indeed the most effective. That includes looking carefully, consistently and at times courageously at the evidence for and impact

[Edward Timpson]

of measures placed on specific parts of the economy, not least, as virtually every Member who has spoken has highlighted, the hospitality sector—pubs, restaurants, hotels and, as I have raised on numerous occasions with Ministers and in the House, the £10 billion-plus wedding industry. Irrespective of tier, it remains restricted to just 15 people at its venues, despite equivalent indoor events and business conferences now being able to operate at 50% capacity, or up to 1,000 in tier 2 or 2,000 in tier 1. That is decimating what was, and can still be, with the right approach by Government, a thriving and growing sector. Northern Ireland has shown that socially distanced weddings and receptions are not virus spreaders, so please, please can Ministers enable weddings in Cheshire and across the country to operate to socially distanced capacities, before it is too late?

With lockdown ending, the House has to make a decision this evening on the measures now needed to control the virus while enabling as much normality as possible. While recognising the often invidious conundrums facing us, I am not sure that in all circumstances that balance is yet right, and I have real sympathy for those living with some of the apparent anomalies that exist. However, this continues to be a public health emergency, so I will support these regulations, albeit with a similar ask to that of colleagues—that we work together to find the best and most effective path to prosperity.

4.54 pm

Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab): Putting further restrictions in place is not what anyone wants. I think we all understand why some level of restrictions is needed, but I cannot support these restrictions and I do not support the way this tiered system breaks the backs of the very poorest in communities, such as my own in the Jarrow constituency.

When we were last in the three-tier system, my constituency started in tier 2. It then went into the national lockdown and we are now going into tier 3. It simply did not work, which is why I call on the Government to ensure that mistakes are not repeated and that no area is left behind. It is irresponsible of the Government to insist that those in tier 3 put up with further hardship, while at the same time encouraging a national knees-up during the Christmas period. This irresponsibility is likely to lead to another devastating national lockdown in January.

There is no point in having devastating restrictions on the hospitality sector if people across all sectors are going into work with covid symptoms simply because they cannot afford to live on £95 a week, or do not qualify for the test and trace support payment due to the strict criteria in place. If people are not self-isolating, it is not because they are selfish or bored, but simply because the Government are not supporting them to do so.

Many in communities such as mine live financially from week to week, month to month. If they are forced to self-isolate for two weeks, it means a further slide into debt and rent arrears. Making it financially possible for everyone with covid symptoms to self-isolate must be a priority now for the Government.

It is also grossly unfair that local businesses in my region are set to lose out compared with areas of the country that have spent less time in restrictions. The one-off nature of the £20 a head business support grant means that local authorities must stretch out funding for as long as they are in tier 3, and the tier 3 restrictions are devastating for community pubs such as the Red Hackle in Jarrow, which has been doing great work in supporting kids in our community when the Government refused to fund free school meals over the half-term period. I pay tribute to Lee and the team there.

Unfortunately, the £1,000 grant announced today for wet pubs will barely touch the surface. It demonstrates just how out of touch this Government are with the struggle that the hospitality industry is now facing. I support restrictions in principle, but we need a greater financial support package that includes adequate grants for businesses, full pay for those who need to self-isolate, an uplift in social security, and financial support for the excluded. It is time for the Government to change their strategy. Along with an effective vaccine, only by having—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Sorry, time is up.

4.57 pm

Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con): We have now had 253 days of restrictions of one form or another—days of uncertainty, of mental strain and of hardship. My vote today will affect many. Hardship will continue. The aim of the Government is to suppress the spread of coronavirus and, thanks to the work of so many, that is happening. I accept reluctantly—but I do accept—that, while much progress has been made, there is much more to do.

These measures are not welcome. Any restriction on everyday life is not welcome, especially at this time of year. Nottinghamshire is set to enter tier 3 tomorrow—hopefully not for long, but its covid rates, while thankfully falling, remain high among the over-60s, the most vulnerable group, and the number of covid patients in hospital beds is also high. Against that background, I understand that further measures are necessary to prevent a deterioration of the situation and to ensure that any future relaxation will be safe and made at a time when levels of the virus are low enough that restrictions will not have to be reintroduced at a later date.

All parts of society are affected by these measures, but I will, if I may, focus the time that I have on an aspect of the hospitality trade that will be affected in Gedling. I know that many pubs, such as the Robin Hood & Little John in Arnold and the Cross Keys in Burton Joyce, had hoped to reopen in a covid-secure way in the run-up to Christmas, which is an important time for them, and those in tier 3 will not be able to do so. George Orwell, in his essay "The Moon Under Water" described his ideal pub thus:

> "If you are asked why you favour a particular public-house, it would seem natural to put the beer first, but the thing that most appeals to me…is what people call its 'atmosphere'."

Man is a social animal.

So many have been deprived of social contact this year, and at the heart of our communities are our pubs, which also provide incomes and livelihoods for so many. It would be a tragedy if this virus, which has run through the wet markets of Wuhan, were to destroy the wet pubs of England. It would not be an England in which I would want to live.

I know that there are limits to the power of Government, and there are certainly limits to Government spending. I welcome today's announcement, but I trust that the Government will realise the scope of the problem and what might potentially be lost, and continue to provide support. Orwell said that the perfect pub has

"the solid, comfortable ugliness of the nineteenth century";

we should do all we can to ensure that they survive well into the 21st.

5 pm

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): 'Twas the night before Eid, 116 days ago. That evening, the majority of people in my constituency were preparing for the next day and kids had gone to bed thinking they would wake up to Eid. But Eid was cancelled—it was done on Twitter by our Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. We had to scurry around and give out all the uncooked and cooked food to neighbours, friends and family. Now, we are approaching Christmas and we are still nowhere.

The end of the road is nowhere in sight for us in Bradford West. It has been 116 days so far. This morning, I spoke to the chief nurse at my local hospital, Karen Dawber. Before I tell the House what she said, may I put on the record my thanks to the doctors, nurses, support workers, cleaners and supporters of my local hospital in my constituency for all their hard work and for the long days ahead that they are going to be working?

Karen told me that the hospital has had an increase in numbers, so it is absolutely right that we support the restrictions, and I do support them, because our hospital does not have the capacity. There is a north-south divide: we have been underfunded. We should not be in this position where we do not have the capacity and cannot change the tier system despite the fact that, because we have put in our own resources, Bradford Council is reaching 90% of test and trace contacts. That is much more than Serco managed—it was reaching 40% for nine weeks and is still not meeting the 80% target. We have reduced infections by 24% but we are still nowhere near the end of the tier system or these restrictions.

How am I supposed to support the Government? Like many of us in this Chamber, I have repeatedly asked the Government for financial support for my constituency and for businesses in my constituency. The simple fact is that this is unfair. It is unfair that somewhere that is in tier 3 gets the same amount of funding if they have been in it for only 30 or 40 days, while we have to string it out for 116 days with no end in sight. It is not fair on Bradford West or for the businesses in Bradford West, and the Government are still not meeting the needs of those who are excluded.

Havering is in tier 2 with 269 cases per 100,000, yet Bradford has 256 cases per 100,000 and we are in tier 3. Neither the lives of the most vulnerable nor the jobs of the poorest in society are expendable, so I will not support these measures until the Government step up for the businesses and people in my constituency of Bradford West, because they deserve better.

5.3 pm

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): When I declined to support the regulations on the national lockdown on 5 November, I did so on the basis that they were disproportionate and went beyond what was necessary and justified by the evidence. I said that I would support regulations that were proportionate and based on the evidence. Unhappily, the regulations before us are not; they are disproportionate, still, and they go beyond the evidence, still. I had hoped very much that I would find in the briefings and analysis something that would persuade me to support them, but it is not there.

The impact assessments are frankly inadequate, particularly on the economic side, and I am concerned generally that there remains a lack of economic rigour in the decision-making approach that has been adopted on this matter. We all want to protect the NHS and we all want to protect those who are vulnerable, but we do not protect the NHS by doing fundamental damage to our economy without having set up the most rigorous arguments to convince us that that is necessary and that there is no other option to achieve the desired objective. I am sorry to say—it is a matter of real regret—that that has not been achieved.

Proportionality requires an assessment of the beneficial effects of any restrictions against the harm they will cause, and a judgment can then be made on that. The analysis documents that we have seen do not include an accurate assessment of those benefits or the harms of the tiers.

The tiers themselves are, frankly, arbitrary in many cases. I happen to live in a London borough in one tier; many of my friends live within in the county of Kent, in a part of Kent that has very low infection rates, but because of the rigid application of tiering by top-tier authority, rather than by a more nuanced approach, they are dragged disproportionately into restrictions that will seriously damage friends and families of my constituents and businesses that feed into the business chains of my constituents. That is not justified upon the evidence.

While certain changes have been advantageous to the hospitality sector, such as the end of the 10 pm curfew, it is still disproportionately affected, and I have not yet seen any justification. I am sorry to have to say that; I had hoped that the Government would have gone away and done more work on this.

The counterfactuals that were set up were of no regulations. That is not a realistic counterfactual; the counterfactual should have been of a more proportionate set of regulations that were more nuanced and more targeted. In the absence of that, and therefore in the absence of evidence to balance against the potential economic harm, I believe that there are better ways of protecting lives and protecting the NHS than these regulations. So, again, I cannot support them tonight.

5.6 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): The Government's response to the pandemic has been incompetent, shambolic, arrogant and, alas, corrupt. The centralised, top-down approach they have enacted would be the envy of any former Soviet bloc country during the cold war. Local directors of public health have been sidelined and ignored, making way for expensive management consultants and members of the Conservative party's chumocracy. The £12 billion test and trace system has failed. The Prime Minister and other Ministers keep trumpeting figures saying that we have got more tests done, but what is important is not the number of tests but what we do with them in terms of tracing people, and the rates for national test and tracing are below

[Mr Kevan Jones]

60%, compared with local test and tracing rates of 90-odd per cent. Clearly, therefore, the system has failed.

The right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) asked what the solution is. Well, the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) gave the answer: what we need are locally based strategies for test and tracing. We do not need mass lateral flow testing, because there is no evidence at all from the Liverpool experiment that that has worked and the logistical exercise of implementing it across all the required tier 3 areas would prove impossible.

On the vaccine, the Government have put the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), in charge; well, nothing can go wrong there then, can it? What has he actually done? He has threatened people who do not have the vaccine with not being able to go to pubs and offered a supermarket voucher for people who have it, instead of doing what my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) said, which is to make the argument and work with local government to deliver it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins) is right: people have lost faith in the tier system. The Prime Minister and other Ministers said that science would dictate the agenda, but it is not doing so; politics is. That is why London is in tier 2 and the north-east is going to be put in tier 3. So much for the levelling-up agenda of this Government. The north-east is this country's poorest region; the idea that jobs there mean less to this Government than jobs in London speaks for itself. That is why I cannot support these measures tonight and will be voting against them.

5.8 pm

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): Most of the east midlands is in tier 3 due to the vast number of cases in the second wave. Applying the five criteria to my constituency, we have had above national average rates in all ages and above national average rates in the over-60s, yet our rates have fallen significantly and our positive rates are falling. However, pressure on our local NHS is still high, as rates are 30% above the peak in covid cases in April, and there is a serious risk of further suspension and cancellation of non-covid services. When I voted for the national lockdown, it was to protect the NHS nationally from being overloaded, and the same logic applies locally.

However, my concerns are wider than that and what happens in two weeks. My first concern is being coupled with Leicester. The second is the model applied on 16 December. Since the announcement of the tiers, my Leicestershire colleagues and I have argued for Leicestershire to be decoupled from the city. This is not covid nimbyism but an evidence-based approach. How can I be sure? Because Leicester and Leicestershire are living proof of a model that worked for us before. We did it in the summer. If a blanket approach had been taken, Hinckley and Bosworth would have been entering 154 days of higher lockdown measures, like the city. It was unjustifiable then, and it is unjustifiable now. I have taken heart from the assurances I have received privately and in a letter from the Health Secretary, in which he stated:

"We will again assess each area individually, including Leicestershire, on its own merits."

That leads me to the second part: moving tiers. The Prime Minister said in response to my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) that he would be taking as "granular" an approach as possible. On 1 September, the Health Secretary said to the Chamber:

"We are driven by the data."—[*Official Report*, 1 September 2020; Vol. 679, c. 36.]

Taking those two points together, Hinckley and Bosworth have categorically proved that my community can apply the rules and maintain tier 1 while neighbours are in tier 3. This is unequivocal, real-world data for a borough-based model in Leicestershire.

My ask of the Government is this. Let the people of Hinckley and Bosworth be the masters of their own destiny. Empower them to follow the rules and drive the rates and hospital admissions down. Give them the chance to again demonstrate, as we did in the summer, that we can control the virus. In return, come the 16th, provide them with a lower tier and a tried and tested borough-based system for Leicestershire, so that we can save lives and livelihoods.

5.11 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I start from the fundamental principle that we do need restrictions across the country in some shape or form. I remember earlier in the year being howled at by various lunatic journalists who told me angrily that the idea that we would ever get to 200 deaths a day this autumn was preposterous and based on false science. Well, we have seen 400, 500 and, on occasion, 600 deaths a day, so we have to take these matters seriously.

As Advent always leads to Christmas, and as Christmas always leads to Epiphany, so lower restrictions always lead to higher transmission rates, and higher transmission rates always lead to problems for the local NHS. That is true in every country in the world; there is no way of avoiding it. Government Members would be daft to listen to the blandishments that they have heard from the Prime Minister over the last couple of days. I would bet that not a single area goes from tier 2 to tier 1 before Christmas, simply because tier 1 does not work—it does not bring the numbers down. There might be some areas that go from tier 3 to tier 2, but there will not be any that go from tier 2 to tier 1, and the Government know it.

There will not be any more nuanced rules and granularity when it comes to the second week of December or the end of February. One thing that has been really difficult for businesses in the hospitality industry is that they are endlessly being told to switch on and switch off. Someone who runs a pub buys in the beer and then has to pour it all down the drain. Incidentally, they are not allowed to pour it down the drain any more. They have to make special provision for it, and that does not mean bringing all their friends round and drinking it. There is a real problem in the brewing industry, and every time we switch on and switch off, it makes this all the more difficult.

I say to the Prime Minister: stop with the metaphors—I am sick and tired of them—and no more overpromising, because when he underdelivers on those promises, it means that the nation stops believing in him. Let us also not be parochial. I am sorry to say to the hon. Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans) that he was being precisely nimbyish. He was saying that he does not want Leicester

in his backyard—that is nimbyism. The truth is that we are all in this together, and we have to take this forward as a national enterprise, not a parochial one.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call Steve Brine.

5.14 pm

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): I said to the Prime Minister earlier that my area has seen a drop in the seven-day average of 55%, yet we emerge from the national restrictions in tier 2 having entered them in tier 1, so we could be forgiven for asking, "How so?" In truth, I cannot answer that one. MPs were not consulted about the decision and, according to our county council and our director of public health, nor were they. That begs the question, how will the position change ahead of the 16 December review point, and what exactly needs to happen among the five stated data points outlined in the Secretary of State's written statement last Thursday to get us down to tier 1 in very short order? I am hopeful.

Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): It is obvious that consultation with local government leaders and MPs has been woeful.

Steve Brine: Woeful? It has been non-existent in many instances. I am not reassured to hear that that has been happening across the border in Dorset as well, and I am not surprised.

I need to hear from the Government how this will change in the next two weeks and, to echo the calls in this respect today from many speakers on both sides of the House, I need to see a much more localised approach rather than a regional approach. My constituents are perfectly capable of knowing where they live, be that Winchester, Alresford or Chandler's Ford in the Eastleigh borough, and of course we would go into that arrangement with our eyes wide open. We would know full well that it could work in our favour if our rate went down, every bit as much as it could work against us if the rate went up. My message to Ministers is, "Please treat us as grown-ups. Involve us in your decision making, because by that route, you might just find that we are able to help build some consent and compliance with whatever it is that is decided."

The reality is that for many of us, tomorrow will feel a lot like today—working from home, bans on meeting friends and family, and many other restrictions on our lives—but for many of my bars, pubs and restaurants, not so much. They are in a terrible place. I know from talking to some of them in the last 24 hours that it is not the substantial meal point that is killing them; it is the fact that tier 2 prevents any household mixing indoors. They can open, but the trade just is not there, and because they are in tier 2, the financial support is not there either. It is the worst of all worlds.

We are told that that very household mixing is where the danger lies. To quote the Prime Minister in his letter to MPs on Saturday:

"It would not take much loosening for the transmission rate to rise again".

So why on earth—no matter how much I understand the desire not to be the modern puritans, and no matter how much I want a normal Christmas this year—are we relaxing the rules for five days at Christmas? To echo a phrase—I am sorry to say this—would that not be to trip on the last barbed wire and blow it just as the cavalry, in the form of the vaccine, comes into view? My hunch is that many people will have already decided for themselves to avoid seeing family and grandchildren over Christmas this year. Frankly, I salute their good sense in doing so.

The record shows that I did not vote for lockdown 2.0 on 2 November. Nothing that has happened since has told me that I made the wrong decision then. The tiered system, while not perfect, for some of the reasons I have outlined, is far better than a national lockdown, which, for the record—I am bored with saying it—was never a lockdown. But we are not just recreating the tiered system here this evening, because schedule 4 of the tiers regulations lists exactly where each area falls. That makes it very hard for me to support them this evening.

In closing, I will just say this. Let us just get these vaccines over the line. The MHRA is tough and will do its job as it should, but let us get them over the line and get them rolled out with the sort of British efficiency that we are supposed to be good at. Then—guess what?—the annus horribilis of 2020 will go away and these Hobson's choices that we are being forced to make will go away as well.

5.18 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): It is a pleasure to follow the metaphors of the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) and, indeed, the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). I agreed with much of what they both said, and with what many said before them.

First, to reflect the tone of so many of the emails and letters that we have been getting, people are fed up. They are completely fed up. There are also devastated, but I find that the letters that hit me hardest are the ones that are now almost pleading. They are pleading with the Government to get it right. There is a local bar that anyone who might have gone to Oxford would know well—I will not name it—that is about to go under. Its owner said that the tier 2 restrictions on pubs and bars are going to be absolutely devastating, and that "a company is simply not an economic organisation; it is a group of people who strive together, and the new measures will put all of our company at risk." We are now at the point where the Government do not have the confidence of the people who are writing to me, and that is deeply concerning.

I have concerns about the restrictions, which is why I and the Lib Dems will not be supporting them today, but it is not because they are wrong in and of themselves. We need restrictions, but the package around them has not been working right. The restrictions are predicated on what I believe is a false dichotomy: that it is health or wealth, that it is lives or livelihoods, and that there is a balance between the two. It could work if we had all the variables in front of us, knew what every single one was and kept them in a fine balance in real time, but the uncertainties are so huge that, as we have seen from the tier system so far, it does not work. The Secretary of State himself said at the Dispatch Box that tiers 1 and 2 do not really work. They do not bear down on the virus; they stop the spread from happening as fast. Tier 3 seems to hold steady, and tier 3-plus and lockdown does depress the virus.

[Layla Moran]

To gamble with such a system—I would love to see the evidence that shows that it is going to work—at a time when we still do not have the vaccines is a big mistake on the part of the Government. My plea to them, in the short time that I have, is for more transparency. Please can we have transparency from Silver, Gold and Covid-O, and transparency about all the decisions that are being made to local areas, not with them?

I think the tier system is an attempt at localism from a Government who do not seem to understand fundamentally what that is. Localism means that when there are difficult decisions to make, they need to be made as close to the people they affect as possible. Please do better.

5.21 pm

Laura Farris (Newbury) (Con): I think that any decision the Government made tonight would have left them open to criticism. I cannot improve on what Lord Finkelstein said in his comment piece in *The Times* in October:

"If Boris Johnson persists with targeted measures for small areas, you can complain that the patchwork is almost impossible to understand and you would be right. Yet if he simplifies the whole thing, applying restrictions across big regions, you can…point out that he has bundled together places with different infection rates. And you would be right with that criticism, too."

If he closes pubs and keeps schools open he is killing hospitality while the kids spread the virus through the playground, and if it is the other way round he is putting booze over education. The point is that there is no right answer. Every choice carries risk and causes collateral damage.

My constituents have made some very compelling points to me. Some say that in an area such as West Berkshire, where the rate of infection is 63 per 100,000, the risk is now exaggerated, but that misses the fact that between 1 October and 1 November the rate of infection quadrupled, mirroring the national picture. We learn from paragraph 3.5 of the impact assessment published yesterday that, by the end of October, England

"was on a trajectory to exceed total NHS capacity in England within weeks",

with a mortality rate of 24% for all hospitalisations, so we cannot be complacent.

The second point that is made is that the cure is now worse than the disease. I treat with respect and deference the emails I have received from pubs from The Pheasant Inn in Hungerford in the west of my constituency to The Old Boot Inn in the east. They say that they were relying on their Christmas custom for their very survival. I will always fight for the livelihoods of those I represent, but I ask the House this: if the hospitals were overflowing, as they are in Naples, would people really be going out to meet their mates in the pub? If we got to January and had no choice but to enter another national lockdown, would that be better or worse? We know the answer.

I prefer the Government's approach of slowly taking our foot off the brake. They know that they need to sustain their moral authority, and they must do that by providing a clear road map between tiers and working with local directors of public health. When we are on the brink of getting a vaccine approved—we now know that it is effective—in my view it would be a catastrophe to fall at the final hurdle.

5.24 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I must admit that I felt quite irritated listening to the Prime Minister's juvenile efforts to goad Labour over this vote earlier today. Does he not understand that this is not the time for smirking and posturing, or that, in part, we are in this mess because of his repeated failures? Perhaps a bit of sincerity and humility would not go amiss, although frankly I am not sure that he does either of those things. The simple truth is that people are fed up with the shenanigans, the stop-go policies and the overly optimistic and utterly outrageous claims, and they are sick of the contracts for friends of the Tory party.

I have to confess that I am tempted to vote against this proposal tonight because I am sick of the damage the Prime Minister has done to local businesses and to the hospitality sector in Birmingham, but I will almost certainly abide by our leader's decision because I recognise that, as we approach the worst part of winter, this is not the time for a free-for-all where we let the virus run amok. But what I would like to know is, when that decision was taken to put Birmingham into tier 3 and London into tier 2, who were the Ministers who made the economic case for London? I do not hold that against them, but I want to know why there was no one there to speak up for Birmingham.

Earlier today, the Prime Minister waffled on about £1,000 for wet pubs. That is less than £33 a day for the rest of this month. What does he think they run on? Hot air? His hot air? I really want a situation where we are trying to look after the people who need help. Our hospitality sector is on its knees and it will be virtually wiped out come March. It is time we had real, immediate and urgent assistance to keep our pubs, clubs and restaurants open. We also need measures for those self-employed people who have been cast aside by the Government and are now virtually on the breadline. It simply is not right that the Government should take into account the economic consequences for London but apply a different set of criteria when it comes to places such as Birmingham. If the Prime Minister and the Conservatives stand by and let our hospitality sector be destroyed, the people of Birmingham and the west midlands will never forgive them.

5.27 pm

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): We have heard some passionate speeches this afternoon opposing the Government's measures, but I have to say that on this occasion I feel they are wrong. We have had much quoting of local infection rates, which of course are an important measure, but equally important is hospital capacity, and hospitals are not necessarily in the same constituency or council area as the relevant infection rates. Earlier I listened to the passionate and powerful speech from my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), who referred to his Market Rasen ward. Market Rasen is about 15 miles outside the boundary of my constituency, and people in Market Rasen go to Grimsby, Scunthorpe and Lincoln hospitals if they need treatment. None of those hospitals is in the same council area as Market Rasen.

We need to take note of what Peter Reading, the chief executive of Northern Lincolnshire and Goole NHS Foundation Trust, said in a statement this morning:

"In common with all trust chief executives, I am concerned that some media reports in recent days have suggested the hospitals are under less pressure than last winter. We believe these reports misunderstand and grossly under-estimate what is actually happening and the huge impact that covid has had on operations and capacity in our hospitals".

It is irresponsible not to take note of such comments.

Locally, my infection rate in the constituency has roughly halved over the past two or three weeks, so it is difficult to argue that the lockdown has not had some impact. We had a low infection rate in the spring, and people wanted to put up the shutters and prevent people from coming to our area. They also wanted strict enforcement. Now, they want equally strict enforcement because we have a significantly higher rate. Those who argue that the Government are taking too much notice of a small group of experts in SAGE and so on also have to explain why most major European countries are deploying similar policies. Are all their experts equally wrong?

We do need more support, particularly for coastal areas. Where the Government decree that businesses should cease going about their legal business, they need more support from the Government. I and my immediate neighbours will certainly be pressing the Minister for additional support.

Like other hon. Members, I have doubts about the five days of relaxation for Christmas. We should be mindful of what could happen in the new year.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Before I call Rachael Maskell, if anybody is on the call list who does not intend to take part in the debate and who has not withdrawn already, please get the message through to the Speaker's Office so we can better manage the rest of the debate.

5.30 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): We need strong public health measures and strong support for our economy. Tragically, the Government have provided neither to a satisfactory extent to rescue businesses that are on the brink or to safeguard us against the virus. As we have heard many times in today's debate, with the vaccine in sight, we need to put that bridge in place now to get us through this difficult season.

I want to look at some of the measures that the Government should have taken during the lockdown that would have been game changing in addressing the pandemic. First, I will focus on local contact tracing. Across the world, we have seen how the power and the precision of local contact tracing have made a difference. I can testify that in York, when we were heading into tier 3 due to the rapid spike of infections in our city, our public health team went the extra mile, got hold of the data, phoned people on a local number, knocked on doors and had that discussion as to why people should isolate.

The results have been phenomenal. Yesterday, there were only 14 infections in our city and the positivity rate has dropped dramatically to 5.79, so we know that it is having an effect. However, the team cannot get hold of the data until day three, four or five because Serco is holding it. I plead with the Minister to release the data on day one so we can lock down the virus and stop it entering our community, and will not need to lock down the economy and people in future.

Secondly, I want the Government to take a more public health approach to the economy. With all health and safety matters, we inspect workplaces, we certificate them to say that they are safe, and then they can open. There is no reason why we cannot do that for covid. Again, I ask the Minister to look at taking that public health approach to the economy. If somewhere is not covid-secure, we should absolutely turn the key in its door, but if it is, it is safe to open if the public respect those public health measures.

Thirdly, new research came out yesterday that said that 22% of people will spend Christmas on their own. We know that 2 million people face severe issues with loneliness, and we need to address that. I urge the Minister to move heaven and earth, and to move the rapid lateral flow tests and our armed forces if they can assist, to ensure that people can access a test if that will mean that they will not be on their own at Christmas. We know that people will self-restrain, or else people will be given the present that nobody wants this Christmas, so I trust that we will have those tests available.

5.33 pm

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): Much has already been said in this debate, so I will keep my points short. I am incredibly disappointed that Redcar and Cleveland is in tier 3 on the back of the national lockdown, but seeing that London was placed in tier 2 and shielded from the harshest restrictions made that consideration worse. I would be grateful if the Secretary of State could say why when he responds. My constituents were rightly confused by the implication that they were more likely to catch covid on Redcar beach than on the tube in London, or that they were more vulnerable on Marske High Street than those who will flock to Oxford Street tomorrow.

That said, there is hope for us. I want us to move down the tiers at the review on the 16th. In Redcar and Cleveland, cases are now down to 140 per 100,000, which means that the number of cases has more than halved since the original tiering decision last week. So provided our numbers remain comparatively low, there is no clear justification for keeping areas such as mine under these high restrictions beyond 16 December. What I fear these tiers fail to represent is the differences between our communities. I represent two towns, Redcar and Eston, and a number of villages, and our decisions on tiering must reflect that, particularly when population density is much lower and people do not travel nearly as much.

Behind the tiering system lie the support measures we have put in place. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer has done an amazing job in what he has achieved so far, and today's announcement for hospitality is certainly welcome. But for our pubs, particularly our wet pubs, which are not likely to open in many parts of the country until February, we need to consider the real societal impact of losing these community hubs if we do not provide the right level of support to help them reopen when the fog lifts. I urge the Government to look at what further measures they can introduce to help those pubs get through this

[Jacob Young]

difficult period, such as cutting alcohol duty, VAT exemptions and re-examining thresholds once the national restrictions are lifted.

Finally, although some of my hon. Friends may walk through a different Lobby from me later tonight, at least we are making decisions. It is incredibly shameful that, once again, the Leader of the Opposition has chosen to sit on his hands and abstain on such an important decision. Far from new leadership this Christmas, we see this is another version of the silent knight.

This is the last haul, the final stretch before we reach the vaccine, which, combined with rapid mass testing, means we will finally able to get our lives back to normal. I will vote for the restrictions tonight, but we have to demonstrate that areas can move down the tiers. I look forward to discussions with the Secretary of State on how we can achieve that for Redcar and Cleveland.

5.36 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): It is pleasure to make a short contribution to this debate, which has been compelling to follow. The constant thread we find, no matter which way people will vote tonight, is enormous frustration in all parts of the House, the roots of which are to be found in the fact that the Government have lost their way in tackling covid. There is a lack of coherent strategy and of route maps from one tier to the other. I say to those on the Treasury Bench that my Liberal Democrat colleagues and I will not take part in the Division tonight; we feel it would be irresponsible to leave the country in a situation where we did not have regulation after midnight, but that should not necessarily be taken as a green light for the Government to continue to act in this way in the future.

I also hope that the listening extends not just to the Department of Health and Social Care, but to the Home Office. I am sure I was not the only Member who looked at the TV screens at the weekend and saw police officers in London enforcing the Home Secretary's rule of two. People speak about the cost of the cure being perhaps greater than that of the disease and we tend to think of that in financial terms, but clearly the way in which we have tackled covid has a cost that goes well beyond that. I have little sympathy for those arrested on the streets in London at the weekend—I agree with almost nothing that they say—but it is important that in this House, of all places, we should be able to support their right to assemble, and to protest peacefully and within the law. We walk away from that at our peril, because these freedoms were hard-won and if we give them up, they will not be easily brought back.

I wish to say a few short words about the position facing the travel industry, which is in many ways the Cinderella service in all this. I have been speaking to travel agents in my constituency. In the early days they kept their doors open. They were having to work around the clock to process cancellations and the rest of it, making sure that people got refunds. Since then, they have seen their business fall off a cliff. There is lots of help out there for other aspects of hospitality, and rightly so, but these are people who are now being left with nowhere to go. These businesses work not in weeks or months, but in months and years, and they are being left behind. There are very few simple things that require to be done, but the Government have to listen to them now.

5.39 pm

Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con): I share the concerns expressed by many Members about the lack of consistency in the application of tiering and how areas are allocated into it, but also about how particular sectors are subject to social restrictions on the most arbitrary of judgments. I was struck by what the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) said, because these decisions are being taken on the back of a fag packet, but are destroying whole swathes of the hospitality industry. As a Conservative, it appals me that we are being so cavalier about jobs and wealth creation, and we need to think carefully about that, not least because so many businesses have invested thousands of pounds to make themselves more covid-secure.

The fact of the matter is that if we are not mixing while having a meal with our friends or having a pint in a pub, we are going round to each other's houses. Our homes are a lot less covid-secure, which brings me back to some of the points that colleagues have made about the relaxation over Christmas. It seems to me that that is far less covid-secure than allowing the hospitality sector to thrive a little more, particularly given that November and December are make or break for so many hospitality and retail businesses.

I am actually very disappointed with where we have got to. It is not surprising that we are here, is it, because it is winter? At this time every winter, the NHS gets taken over by a collective anticipatory anxiety about what will happen over the next three months, because we never know. The NHS has to make the best possible plans without knowing the extent of a flu epidemic, for example. Add covid on top of that and it is not surprising that the NHS is being risk-averse, but it is our job, and the job of Ministers, to give challenge and ensure that those decisions are proportionate.

We talk about protecting the NHS, but these decisions have not been about protecting the NHS; they have been about protecting hospitals and bed capacity within them. The NHS is more than hospitals; this is about everybody who works in the NHS, and I will just give a bit of a shout-out to our paramedics and ambulance crews, who, frankly, are bearing the brunt of the fact that so many GPs have still not reopened their surgeries. More and more people are calling 999, and because of isolate, test and trace, our ambulance crews are overstretched. So many are not in self-isolation, and so many are working very long shifts. When we talk about protecting our NHS, it is more than beds in hospitals. Let us make sure we protect the entirety of it.

5.42 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price). I agree with many of the points she raised. We are on the cusp of vaccine roll-out, but the Government's response must not underestimate the continued threat of the virus. We know that the previous three-tier system did not work, and we ended up in a national lockdown. Nobody wants a repeat of that. The Government should have learned from those mistakes, but it does not seem that they have.

Not only have the Government failed to fix test and trace during the lockdown, but they are recklessly ploughing on with the tiered system and the insufficient economic support package. The £20-a-head business support grant is only a one-off payment, and businesses are in the dark about the future of the furlough scheme. Furthermore, tier 1 areas receive the same support package for just 28 days of national lockdown as areas now facing many months in tier 3. The Federation of Small Businesses said that the spending review was

"a missed opportunity to help small business owners—not least those who have been excluded from support measures".

I, too, am very concerned about the impact of these regulations on the pub and hospitality industry. The situation in the Office for Budget Responsibility's alarming employment forecasts has been accelerated by the Government's approach to the sector, which expects to have lost nearly 600,000 jobs by February 2021. That is in the space of a year. UKHospitality states that 98% of the hospitality trade will be in either tier 2 or tier 3 and will see a 70% drop in trade for the whole of December, representing £7.8 billion lost. The sector needs increased support to help it through the crisis.

The decision to allow pubs to open only if they sell food will devastate the industry across the country, and I have heard at first hand from pubs in Luton South about how the lockdown restrictions have damaged their business, but also about how wet-led pubs have implemented covid-secure measures to keep their customers safe, taking contact details, using table service and doing regular cleaning. I hope that the Government will publish the scientific evidence for closing the wet-led pubs, so that we can understand how the risk posed is any different from that posed by pubs that serve food or, indeed, going to the supermarket.

I fully support the Campaign for Real Ale's call for fair treatment of all pubs, which includes publishing the scientific evidence, sector-specific support, and parity between wet-led pubs and those that sell food.

The Government have not learned from their mistakes, have not listened to SAGE on lockdown, and have not introduced sufficient measures to protect public health or the economy.

5.45 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): It is difficult to say something fresh and original when you are No. 79 on the list, but I will give it a go.

I cannot support these regulations, and it is not because I am some sort of rebel or want to undermine the Government. I and many other hon. Members who have come to this conclusion want to look our constituents in the eye and to make a decision that we think is in their best interests. That is what we were elected to do. It is extraordinary that Labour Members are not here to look anybody in the eye on one of the biggest decisions we are being asked to make. It is a real cop-out, frankly. The debate is happening only on the Government side of the House.

When I look my constituents in the eye, I will have to justify why tomorrow we will be going into tier 2. I can trump everybody here, because Worthing in my constituency has a pandemic level of 28 per 100,000, the lowest in the country. The figure for the other part of my constituency, Adur, is 45. Surrounding us are Arun with 55, Brighton and Hove—even the city—with 57 and Horsham with 67, which are all low, while the sea is hopefully zero. Worthing Hospital has four covid patients; last week it had eight. Our infection rates are falling and our patient levels are falling, yet tomorrow my constituency will be going into tier 2, having started the lockdown in tier 1 and having come down continuously in the right direction. Where is the logic in that?

I will have to look in the eye my pub owners, restaurants owners and those in other hospitality industries, on which we rely greatly in coastal constituencies such as mine. How can I justify the rule that a Scotch egg represents a substantial meal? Why is it safer for someone to have a Scotch egg with their drink than to have a quiet pint with their mate down at the pub? Frankly, after having waited for two weeks for a change of tier—it probably will not happen, because the chief medical officer suggested last week that it would not happen—it will be too late. This is the busiest time of the year, and an industry already on its knees desperately needs to try to get its trade back over the coming weeks. I have given up trying to explain to my constituents why Cabinet Ministers are saying that it is safe to play charades at Christmas, but it is very dangerous to play board games.

People have behaved themselves and have made great sacrifices, but they will still be penalised. We need to see the data, the evidence and the reasoning behind these decisions. I have always said that the Prime Minister needs to be straight with the people; if the Government publish, explain and make people understand the instructions, people will have confidence in them and get it. It was therefore really disappointing to get the document last night—frankly, it is a cut-and-paste job from the OBR from last week—which is a statement of the bleeding obvious. It is littered with terms about allowing the virus to grow exponentially, as if any of us wanted to let it rip; of course we do not. Nobody is suggesting no regulation, but we want proportionate regulation, and it may mean better, tougher regulation in some parts of the country.

We need logical, consistent, proportionate and fair regulations for people to have the confidence to follow them. These are not, and they will not follow them, and then it will undermine everything.

5.48 pm

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): It is a pleasure to follow the impassioned and measured speech of the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton).

This Government have asked the British people to make immense personal and financial sacrifices over the past eight months, and they are now asking the vast majority to continue doing so for many weeks and probably months to come. As a Liberal, I strongly believe in and champion the importance of personal freedom, which is why I have struggled so much with the measures taken to date, but as a Liberal, I also believe that John Stuart Mill's principle of do no harm is critical, which is why I and my Liberal Democrat colleagues are very clear that, sadly, ongoing restrictions on our personal freedoms are needed to keep the virus under control.

We support the overarching principles of a localised approach, which crucially involves local leaders in decision making, but this Government are stubbornly refusing to do that. The execution of the approach, like so many aspects of the Government's response to this pandemic, is deeply flawed. The British people have shown an enormous amount of good will and the vast majority

[Munira Wilson]

have done the right thing, but that can be maintained only if the Government make sure that their decisions are transparent and evidence-based, fair and backed up with proper support. I want to focus in particular on transparency in evidence and, briefly, on support.

No evidence has been provided for the rationale behind the various contradictory and perverse changes in the new tier system. Why in tier 2 is it deemed safe for 1,000 people to attend an indoor event, yet two friends cannot meet for a drink in one of Twickenham's pubs that have spent thousands on ensuring they are covid-secure? If we want to build trust and compliance among the public and provide motivation to stick to the rules to do the right thing, they need to understand what they are working towards, yet the Government have so far refused to publish details of how their five indicators are being applied or weighted. For a party that is supposed to believe in personal responsibility and encouraging people to do the right thing, the Conservatives seem very hesitant to equip people to be able to do so.

I have long argued, along with Government Members, for a full impact assessment that details not just the economic impact, but the non-covid health harms. The flimsy document published yesterday was, frankly, not worth the paper it was written on, and it has left me none the wiser about the impact of the restrictions on my constituents. How does that help to build trust and buy-in to these measures?

On support, briefly, those of us making these difficult decisions do not need to worry about how we will pay for our children's shoes, but many of our constituents whose livelihoods are being destroyed do need to worry. They need far greater support—particularly the hospitality sector and the 3 million who have been overlooked to date. It is simply not good enough. That is why I cannot and will not vote for these measures.

5.51 pm

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con): While we wait for the roll-out of the vaccine, there are no easy choices available to the Government. The choice is between lockdown, a tiered system and an unrestricted return to normal life. From an economic and social perspective, lockdowns are by far the worst option. Entering a cycle of lockdown, reopen and repeat does not amount to living with the virus; it is hiding from it, while causing long-lasting damage at the same time. People have put up with a great deal this year and are understandably desperate to return to their normal lives, but we know that the national health service comes under strain in the winter months in normal times and that these are very far from normal times. To simply reopen with no restrictions would be a huge gamble that could lead to the loss of tens of thousands of lives. That leaves the option of regional tiers, which I believe offer the best option for living with the virus while waiting for a full deployment of the vaccine. In acknowledging that, it is important to recognise that tiers are not a destination; they are a holding pattern.

As colleagues have said, the Government could do a great deal more in making transparent the evidential basis for decisions on tiers. I am not especially happy with my constituency's tier. Orpington is part of the London Borough of Bromley and as such is part of Greater London. While Greater London has a range of infection rates, most are much higher than those in my borough. Greater London also has a very large number of hospitals. We know from Department of Health and Social Care figures that demand on the NHS in London is now, at the end of the year, at only 76% of the level it was at in spring. On that basis, it is possible to make the argument that the NHS has surge capacity to cope with a spike of infections in London and it could therefore perhaps have been placed in tier 1, rather than in tier 2. However, it is also possible to conceive of a situation where the virus could run out of control.

In addition, I note that the Government have listened to representations from colleagues on the Conservative Benches and across the House, and a range of activities can now resume in tier 2 that were not available during lockdown. However, as other colleagues have said, hospitality, in particular pubs, will be hard hit. While the existing measures and the additional financial support announced by the Prime Minister today are welcome, I call on the Government to have another look and see whether more can be done while we wait for the vaccine.

In closing, I must comment on the total abdication of responsibility offered today by the Leader of the Opposition. It is truly scandalous. It is all very well pointing to the faults of others, but a supposedly alternative Government must have an alternative plan. The moral vacuity of standing and saying, "I do not like what you are doing" but neither offering an alternative nor having the courage to vote on it is absolutely damning.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Speakers 82 to 84 have withdrawn, so we go straight to Rob Butler.

5.54 pm

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): I hope that that is not a consolation prize. Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Like so many hon. Members, I face an extraordinarily difficult decision today. The national restrictions were supposed to get a grip on the virus—a short, sharp shock of sacrifice so that we could start to return to a normal way of life in the run-up to Christmas. Instead, my constituents are being asked to come out of the national lockdown into a stronger set of local restrictions than they had before. That is a tough ask, not made any easier by the inadequacy of robust data to support the proposals in front of us; what data we have is frequently inconsistent. The arguments on both sides of the debate have been well rehearsed this afternoon. There is no perfect answer. There are nuances, doubts and what ifs, but the vote is binary—yes or no—and we are paid to decide.

Last week, I met local entrepreneurs who have recently set up restaurants in the town, exactly the businesspeople we need to make Aylesbury a place where people want to live, work, visit and invest. They are haemorrhaging money, despite the very generous support scheme set up by the Chancellor, because they do not meet the right criteria. I want to help those people.

Tier 1, however, was not enough to stop the spread of the virus. My local hospital is close to capacity, and only now are we able to catch up with the missed operations from the lockdown earlier in the year. I receive emails from constituents who are desperate for operations that have been delayed, and whose physical

and mental health is in peril because of the wait. That is before the emergency cases—heart attacks, strokes, diagnoses of cancer, car crashes or other accidents.

I have therefore looked at the conflicting evidence and listened carefully to the arguments in the House today. I have carefully considered the views of constituents who have written with passionately held opinions, and I have spoken to doctors I know and trust. I do not have enough information to make a perfect decision. In that position, I must err on the side of caution.

I must ask myself a brutal question. In a month's time, do I look in the eye someone who has lost their job, or maybe even their home, because of the decision I have made and the vote I cast tonight? Or do I look in the eye someone who has lost their parent, or who now has a terminal diagnosis because of the decision I have made and the vote I cast tonight?

I will vote with the Government—but never did I expect to utter those words with such a heavy heart and such reluctance. The restrictions go against my every instinct. I realise that many in Aylesbury will not thank me for my vote tonight. I appeal to the Prime Minister and others making the decisions to keep our time in tier 2 to an absolute minimum, to assess incredibly carefully whether the restrictions in each tier really are justifiable and proportionate, and to talk to local leaders, so that next time we are asked to vote, we can all look all our constituents in the eye and assure them that then we did the right thing.

5.57 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I am glad that I came to the Chamber in good time.

I was one of those who voted against the national lockdown, because I am in a privileged position: I am a Cornwall MP and I represent the Isles of Scilly—and Cornwall, the Isles of Scilly and the Isle of Wight are the only parts of England in tier 1. I will therefore be voting, if not enthusiastically, in support of the Government, because the tier system is the right thing to have, in particular for Cornwall.

I want to raise a few things. As a libertarian, I do not want to say this, but it is an important part of a national effort to control the spread of coronavirus. Cornwall, the Isles of Scilly and, I assume, the Isle of Wight are concerned about what might happen after today, right through to the Christmas break, because we are already attractive parts of the world and we have suddenly become very much more attractive. Will the Minister and the Secretary of State consider strengthening travel restrictions to ensure that travel from tier 3, for example, is only done when absolutely essential?

We will always welcome visitors to Cornwall to spend their money, but not when we are involved in a national effort to control the spread of the virus. I say that not just for my constituents, but for the whole of the country. We are seeking to battle the virus, to put an end to it, and to move into 2021 with, I hope, a brighter and more hopeful future.

Even a tier 1 MP, however, needs to make the case for hospitality. This year has been brutal for hospitality. Most of the businesses in Cornwall—as well as in Devon and across the country—depend in some way on tourism and on providing food, accommodation and entertainment for people. Despite the generous support so far, large parts of the sector are very unlikely to survive. Again, as a Cornish MP, I know that much of my hospitality can open, but it is still very curtailed.

I recognise that this is partly driving the restrictions that we have to vote on tonight: I long for the day, as I am sure millions of people in the UK do, when the NHS can return fully to providing the care that it usually would for people with long-term conditions. I chair the all-party parliamentary group on diabetes; it is a great honour and privilege to do so. A recent report from Manchester University with the Salford Royal Hospital demonstrates that, in April alone, there were twice as many deaths of people with diabetes during the lockdown as would normally be the case; and that there were 45,000 missed or delayed diagnoses of diabetes type 2. We know that, if diabetes is identified later, people's life chances are reduced, their conditions are aggravated, and pressure of all kinds on the system of social care and the NHS is increased. Please may we do what we can to get the NHS to return to fully caring for those with long-term conditions?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am not going to reduce the time limit, but I will say that if colleagues speak for less than three minutes, more people will get in.

6 pm

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

We are faced with another difficult decision to make in this House today. As a Member of Parliament, I am here to be the voice of my constituents and, in the current situation, to defend their civil liberties as well.

In rural West Dorset, where the western tip is 55 miles from the key decision driver of Bournemouth, which has more than double the number of cases of covid, we, in our hospital in Dorchester, had just four covid patients at the end of last week. The case rate in Dorchester is now falling fast because of the diligent self-responsibility of local people. On 18 November, the case rate was 84.3 per 100,000, yet just a week later it was 45.2 and now it is 44.6. It is now at the lowest it has been since early October, and these numbers are lower than those in the Isle of Wight when the tier 1 decision was made. While I was greatly worried that, when we voted on 4 November for a national lockdown, this would be the case, our hospitals in Dorset are not overrun.

In West Dorset, 97% of our businesses are small or micro-sized. We have a high degree of self-employment. These people and businesses are taking the hit, and have done so willingly throughout this period. These businesses have spent considerable amounts to become covid-secure, and to restrict them to the extent proposed cannot continue any longer, in my view.

It cannot be expected of any Member of Parliament to vote lightly in support of removing these civil liberties. It is incredibly difficult to consider continuing to keep small numbers of family away from their terminally ill parents, and as much as I am pleased that Christmas has some relaxations, I am concerned that the extent of those we are planning may cause unnecessary pain in the new year to our small businesses.

The Government have achieved much in terms of testing and reporting. They have achieved enormous amounts in terms of vaccines too. While I was deeply

[Chris Loder]

uncomfortable at the start of November to see the Government return to a blanket national approach, I do support their approach in returning to a more regional arrangement, but it should be going further and it should be more localised. Dorset should be in tier 1 of the restrictions, and in the absence of a detailed explanation as to why and how we are likely to get out of these restrictions, I shall struggle to support the regulations tonight.

6.3 pm

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Con): I do not envy the Government in making this decision today. There is a lot of pressure, and no matter what decision one makes, it is always bound to be the wrong one with many across these isles. I agree with the concept of the tiering strategy. I even agree with our positioning in the tiering system, although there is a separate argument as to when the decision was made.

At its peak on 3 November, the borough of Bury had 605 cases per 100,000. As of 25 November, that figure has gone down by 60% to 251. That is a great achievement in the fight against coronavirus, and those numbers continue to fall. A 60% drop is something we should be proud of as a community. The timing of the decision needs to be reassessed. We should certainly be considered for tier 2 now, and even more so in two weeks' time.

That leads me to the meaningful review on 16 December. Far too many times in this process, we have been told that we are having a meaningful review, only to be put in a Zoom conversation and be told by a Minister what our restrictions will be, with no input on policy matters or decisions. My plea to the Minister is to make this a truly meaningful discussion by involving MPs, directors of public health, council leaders and all key stakeholders. That is the only way that we will get all parties involved.

The sunset clause is too far off. It will potentially see Greater Manchester being in restrictions for 27 weeks—that is over half a year in restrictions that clearly have not worked, because we saw our cases balloon. I am concerned about the restrictions on hospitality. When jokes are made about some of the restrictions being imposed—for example, about what a substantial meal is—we devalue the restrictions that actually can make a difference. That is why I am really struggling to support the Government today. In tier 2, we are shafting the hospitality sector. In tier 3, it is dead. We need to do much more to support our pubs and hospitality sector.

I would like to close by talking about lower league football. We are essentially creating two tiers in the same division, and staff are having to be un-furloughed just to get players back on the pitch, with no income. I am meeting the Culture Secretary tomorrow, but we need to assess this quickly, so that football can come home for Christmas.

6.6 pm

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): I have highlighted in this Chamber on many occasions the impact that coronavirus is having on businesses and residents in Burnley, Padiham, Hapton, Worsthorne and all our other villages. It is taking an enormous toll. In particular, the toll is focused on our pubs and restaurants, which have never been able to get trade back fully—brilliant local pubs like the Craven Heifer, the Crooked Billet and the Royal Dyche, and family-run restaurants like Usha, Astoria and the Palazzo. What they need more than anything else is to get their trade back.

The Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care know of my deep unease with these measures. It comes from having had them in place for so long. I want businesses trading and families together. But after the huge sacrifices made locally over many months, which have halved the number of infections locally, I reluctantly recognise that now is not the time to step back completely. Going into winter, the local NHS, which has performed admirably, needs the space to treat covid and non-covid patients alike. That means that we in Burnley have a bit further to go to turn our low R rate into a low number of cases.

We can do that, but we need some more support from Government. Rapid tests, which have been used locally in some settings, now need to be rolled out to the general population. We need to see an operation similar to the one in Liverpool. Balancing the health of the nation and the economy has never been a more challenging task, and while I do not see these tiers as a good option, I do understand why the Government have deemed them necessary.

6.8 pm

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): A month ago, my reasons for not supporting a second lockdown were that the measures represented a gross overreach of Government powers over our basic freedoms, that the tiers provided a more targeted response and needed more time, and that the information provided by Government was inadequate and unpersuasive. I made the following requests of the Government: to operationalise rapid testing on a community and venue basis; to put covid into context with other illnesses, so that they did not appear disappeared in terms of their importance; and to make available to Members of Parliament a full assessment of policy consequences before we are asked to make decisions.

In the intervening period, the Government have indeed progressed on many of those fronts. Thankfully, freedom of communal worship has been restored. Freedom to trade has been substantially restored. More needs to be done on freedom to associate. Rapid testing is being deployed, but more needs to be done, particularly to restore confidence in events, in the travel industry and in theatres.

The Government have been kind enough at last to give us the criteria and the data on the decisions about restrictions and we have had a stab at an impact assessment. I have to say to the Minister that the impact assessment has all the hallmarks of an essay crisis, with all possible factors raised, but few of them investigated with any rigour. This is important because for too long the decisions of Government have been in thrall to the medical profession alone, and the trade-offs of the medical profession are always likely to be more precautionary than the broader considerations of Members of Parliament. But we can work with this to help us inform our future decisions.

A month ago, I wrote to constituents to say:

> "I am sure we are all irritated that restrictive measures are being proposed, but irritation is not a sufficient basis for a Member of Parliament to oppose them.

We are all irritated that perhaps some of us have been placed in higher tiers than we should have been. We are

irritated that the geographies are broader than we think they should be. We are irritated that the Government have, in a sense, put us in a place where we are looking backwards rather than forward, but irritation is not a sufficiency for an alternative policy. We will be able to make tweaks, we will be able to make suggestions, but I return to my conclusion of a month ago that the continuation of the tiered approach is the right policy. We must, however, ask the Government to challenge clause 3.11 of the impact assessment, where they talk about the NHS being overwhelmed in terms of the loss of life, saying such a scenario is considered intolerable. The best way to do that is through scenarios of hospital occupancy to March being made available.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I remind Members again of the two-minute target to get more people in.

6.12 pm

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): When we debated the second lockdown, I wrote in my local paper that I had never felt more conflicted when it came to choosing how to vote in that, for locking down the country, restricting people's liberties, freedoms and ability to see their own families was categorically not what I, or I suspect any Member of this House, got into politics to do. But I was persuaded by the case that our national health service could not become overloaded and overstretched, and voted with the Government for that lockdown.

I am pleased to say that, in Buckinghamshire—I checked with the chief executive of Buckinghamshire NHS Healthcare Trust this afternoon—there are currently only five covid patients in critical care beds across our two hospitals. It is with that in mind that I look upon the tiered restrictions that we have in front of us today with some scepticism.

I know that there are no easy answers. I know that whatever Ministers decide they will be criticised for it and that there will be tough decisions to be made. I see the Minister for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), on the Treasury Bench. He and I have known each other for a long time and I have no doubt that he takes every decision—as do all Health Ministers—with incredible seriousness, but I urge the Treasury Bench this evening to look particularly at how we can get greater granularity into the way that we put tiered restrictions in place.

My constituents in north Buckinghamshire find themselves in tier 2 having gone into lockdown from tier 1. When I look at the Government's own interactive map, I see infection rates going down in every single part of my constituency bar one, and the one that has gone up is by only three cases. So my constituents find it very difficult to accept a tiered system where, in the county of Buckinghamshire—the south touches London and Slough with high infection rates—north Buckinghamshire is treated the same as the south. I am really worried about the economic impact.

Over the weekend, I was with a business owner in my constituency who rents out units to microbusinesses, and he told me that in the seven or eight units that he has, four businesses have gone bust as a result of coronavirus restrictions over the past year. Those are business losses that will not be seen in the data at the moment. I appeal to the Government: as we have this review, let us have greater local decision making and make these restrictions as small as they possibly can be.

6.15 pm

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): Now is not the time to turn our backs on what we have achieved in this country. We have sacrificed far too much. We have lost too many lives. We have lost too many jobs and too many businesses to change track now. The Government's objective has always been to save as many lives as possible and to protect the NHS, and there is now light at the end of a very, very dark tunnel. The vaccine is on its way. Testing is improving all the time. I, for one, believe that we cannot turn our backs on that strategy.

In constituencies such as mine, Cities of London and Westminster, we have paid a huge economic price as well as the public health one. I fear for the future of many hospitality businesses, in particular, which have paid so much to make their premises covid-secure. If there is anything I would ask those on the Treasury Bench to do, moving forward as we look at these tiers, it is consider allowing people from different households to eat inside with the rule of six, because restaurants have spent a fortune making their premises so safe, and it is so unfair to make people move outside like this.

The R rate is coming down. The second lockdown did work to bring the R rate down, but it just suppresses the virus. We are not beating it, and we will not until we get a vaccine. If you give this virus an inch, it takes a mile. We have seen this across Europe. We have seen it in France, which has just come out of a lockdown but its restaurants and bars are staying closed until January. It is the same in Germany. Spain and Italy are now looking at restrictions. South Korea, the exemplar of how to deal with a pandemic, is now bringing in new restrictions as the infection rate increases when it opens up its karaoke bars and nightclubs. So we cannot let go now: we have to keep going. There is that light at the end of the tunnel.

I welcome the extra financial support for pubs that was announced today. I certainly welcome the 10 pm curfew ending. The Secretary of State knows my views on that. I welcome the fact that shops can now open for longer, but why not on a Sunday? Why is it just Monday to Saturday? People want to shop on a Sunday too. I have been supporting *The Sun* newspaper's campaign on that, and I ask for further consideration on it.

We are almost there, and we just have to have that final push so that we can get our lives back to normal and send this virus packing.

6.18 pm

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): I felt it was extremely important for me to speak in this debate, and, as I can see from the call list, many Conservative Members feel the same. These are the toughest of times, and it is so important that our constituents know we are here representing them, even if they do not always agree with our thinking. Straight out of a full lockdown and then into tier 3 is not a message any MP wants to give their constituents, but I am afraid that for the residents of Don Valley and the wider Sheffield city region last Thursday, this was the news that they received.

[Nick Fletcher]

Last Saturday night, I went for a walk into my own town of Bawtry, and seeing it locked down was not a good sight, with the bars and restaurants closed and the shops that have not been open for a month looking cold and bare. It saddened me, as I know it will sadden all Members in the House. The shops will open this week, but without the bars and restaurants, our high streets in tier 3 areas will only be half open.

However, much as I would like to be in a position where I could abstain from today's proceedings and take no responsibility for these restrictions, I am here to do a job, and that is to vote. After much thought on the matter, I will be voting with the Government. I do not do this lightly, and I know that many of my constituents will be upset with me, yet I must do what I believe is right, not what I think will get me the most short-term praise. The Government's strategy has always been to reduce the spread of the virus until a vaccine is available. Although I have privately questioned this and suggested different approaches, they have stuck with their plan, and after the news of many new effective vaccines being on the horizon, it looks as though it is just about to come good.

What about the restrictions that we are voting on today? Much as I dislike the situation, with the vaccine just around the corner, to water down the positive effects of the last four weeks would be foolhardy. Yet I believe the Government could better clarify the way in which an area's tier is downgraded. Ideally, they will provide exact case rate numbers, which would determine which tier an area should lie in. This would strengthen people's resolve in getting the rate down.

I also believe that pubs and restaurants should be allowed to open in tier 2 and 3 areas without the need for individuals to have a substantial meal. After all, this is not about food in the slightest. It is a way in which we can ensure that people remain at their tables and do not mingle with other households. However, if the Government do not agree, the best we can all do is unite together by following the guidance.

Finally, whether someone is on the side of opening or of continuing with restrictions, by coming together and respecting these new rules, we can reduce the spread of the virus, protect the NHS and open up our businesses once again.

6.20 pm

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): I have struggled, like many other MPs, over the decision on the new tiering system. Beautiful Hastings and Rye entered lockdown in tier 1 and comes out in tier 2. Lockdown prevented small independent shops from opening, missing out on retail sales in the run-up to Christmas. It prevented people from going to church, to the gym and so on, but this is not a global conspiracy, and Government measures around the world have been successful in squashing the curve of the virus and reducing the overall death rate. However, there is no doubt that there have been economic and other costs to the measures taken to counter covid, and many MPs, myself included, have highlighted the concerns and the need for evidence showing that these restrictive measures have more benefits than costs to people and to businesses. It is, however, worth acknowledging that no one knows the alternative facts on which to base these cost-benefit analyses. How do we know that loosening restrictions would be the only way to get our economy back on its feet? We cannot measure public confidence, for example, and how that would be impacted if alternative or no restrictive measures were taken.

It is clear from what we have seen this year that targeted policies that are balanced, taking into account the spread of the disease and economic costs, are needed, and the Prime Minister has listened and made several specific policy changes, such as extending the 10 pm curfew and opening up non-essential retail, which will be a lifeline to small independent shops in Hastings and Rye in the run-up to Christmas. The Government have made considerable adjustments to the tiering recommendations and, accordingly, they are less detrimental than they might have been for Hastings and Rye, which finds itself in tier 2. I want to highlight hospitality businesses, particularly wet pubs, and I am grateful for the extra support for wet pubs promised today by the Prime Minister. I also want to highlight again freelancers and limited company directors, who have been largely excluded from coronavirus support schemes.

The costs of lockdown depend on the scale and type of intervention. There is no doubt that there are benefits from the interventions that our Government have been pursuing to repress the virus and mitigate the impacts of covid, but we shall never have a true grasp of what these benefits are because we do not know what the alternative would have been. What is clear from the restrictions put in place is that the Government have placed a high value on human life. Saving lives comes at a greater economic cost, and the Government clearly hold all life as equal, irrespective of age, gender, race and so on, and that is irreproachable.

On balance, although I rail against the seemingly authoritarian nature of these restrictions, I agree with the Government that these covid measures are needed to reduce infection, subsequent hospitalisation and possible deaths, and to protect our long-term economy.

6.23 pm

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): Mr Deputy Speaker was in his place before and I know how much he is aching to get back into his beloved Swan with Two Necks, but he also knows the struggles that I have faced in my constituency of Hyndburn and Haslingden and across Lancashire. I am not going to go through all our local data, but I am going to quickly mention that we have seen a 45% drop in the past week in Hyndburn and a drop in the cases among the over-60s. I really do hope that the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, who is now in his place, will understand that and will continue to look at moving us down the tiers. We need support to be ploughed into those tier 3 areas across the country that have been in restrictions for longer than most.

I echo my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Laura Farris): there is no easy option. The trouble is that this Government literally cannot do right for doing wrong. Restrictions mean that businesses struggle. If the Government do not bring in restrictions and infections go up, they are told they should be stricter. That brings me to what my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Rob Butler) said: at some point I may have to look in the eye a constituent who has lost their job or someone who has lost a loved one to this virus. It is no easy decision for anybody in this Chamber.

My local hospitality sector is really struggling. This is something I have been raising consistently. I welcome the Prime Minister's announcement, but more support is needed for pubs and restaurants, especially in tier 3 areas, and I will continue to push for that.

It does not make sense to Tessa Clemson's yoga studio in my patch that leisure centres can reopen but private indoor classes cannot. Can that be considered?

We can give councils lateral flow tests, but there are no resources. We need the Army to be deployed, as happened in Liverpool. Again, we need support to move down the tiers, because we have seen restrictions since July. It is unfair on Hyndburn and Haslingden. I am so proud of our community, but they are fed up.

It is with a heavy heart that I will support the Government this evening. I know that we have come to the last hurdle and cannot give up now, but it really is with a heavy heart that I support these measures.

6.26 pm

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): After much soul searching, I will vote with the Government tonight, but it has been a difficult decision. I will vote with the Government for the following reasons. First, I have always advocated a regional approach as opposed to a national approach, and that is exactly what we are doing. Secondly, the vaccine is close—it is not certain, but it is close—so we should not jeopardise all our gains when we will potentially have the vaccine within a few months.

Thirdly, we are clearly coming out of lockdown, so although my constituency will be in tier 2 and I have lobbied for it to be in tier 1, the restrictions will be less. However, I will continue to lobby for my constituency's tier to be reviewed and for us to come out in a lesser tier. Once we roll out the vaccine to the elderly and the vulnerable, I will ask for restrictions to go, because we need to get life back to normal.

We need to be able to manage risks. We have been absolute about our only focus being coronavirus. Clearly, we do not want anyone to die or suffer from coronavirus, but we need to think about the implications of what we are doing about not only the economy but non-covid health issues. There are parameters within which we can do that analysis, such as quality of life indicators.

I wish to make one final point. I have heard various Opposition Members say that London was in some way given special treatment to be in tier 2. That is absolutely not the case. If Members look at the 26 November NHS—

Mr Kevan Jones: Look at the figures.

Felicity Buchan: That is exactly what I am looking at. The graph shows tier 1 at the bottom left, tier 2 in the middle and tier 3 at the top right, and London is around about the middle, so please do not misrepresent what is going on. This is way too important to be political. These are people's lives and livelihoods.

6.29 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): This vote is incredibly difficult for all of us who will have to make a decision. On the one hand, I of course wish to support my Government as they grapple with the difficult challenge of deciding on the least damaging path to take; I want to protect people from getting covid and I want to help the NHS to care for those who do get it. On the other hand, I look at the damage that could be caused to the life chances, livelihoods and life expectancy about constituents, which drives me to ask serious questions of continuing along the path to where these measures will lead.

When considering this issue and how to vote this evening, I look at the evidence and ask myself the same questions I posed in respect of previous votes: can my local NHS cope, and have we properly assessed the impact of the restrictions so that we know which path will be the least destructive?

We in East Sussex have had very low covid rates this year compared with those in other parts of the country; we did see an increase in November, but the rates are down in the last week by 26%. Today's figures for the local NHS show that we have 37 covid in-patients across our hospitals in East Sussex, and pressure on county NHS beds is reported to be the same as it was at this time last year. We are seeing fewer general admissions and fewer elective surgery admissions; I do appreciate, however, that hospitals are, however, at a greater risk from covid work- load. The NHS system in East Sussex coped fantastically earlier this year, and it has learned lessons which allows it to manage covid cases more effectively. I do not doubt that the situation for those working in hospitals is very challenging; I thank them, I have the utmost respect for them, and I have admiration for all who work in the NHS, but I do believe the evidence shows they are currently able to cope.

Then we come to the question of whether we have properly assessed which path is the least destructive. I have read the Government's health, economic and social impact assessment, and among other worrying patterns it describes 1 million more people being unemployed by June 2021, state secondary school attendance at 78%, and, in September, non-emergency hospital admissions at 30% below pre-covid levels. The Government's assessment does not tell us what the cost of this will be. It must, however, mean an increased risk to the people of this country from poverty; from death as a result of cancer, which already accounts for 165,000 deaths a year; from suicide, which is the biggest killer for those under 50; from poor mental health and loneliness; from failed life chances for our young people; and from domestic abuse.

Neither is a path that we want to follow; either will lead to tragedy and sadness, but I believe there is more danger in following this path than in alternative approaches, so I will vote against these measures this evening.

6.32 pm

Dehenna Davison (Bishop Auckland) (Con): I have listened carefully to today's debate and was going to say that I am really pleased that the House has not descended into the shouting match we often witness, but, as we saw a few minutes ago when my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Felicity Buchan) was speaking, the Opposition never fail to disappoint. However, tensions are high in this place, because each of us here cares passionately about getting this right.

As ever, I come to the Chamber with freedom in my heart and at the core of my values. I have said before and say again that I did not come into politics to restrict people's liberties, but in the context of covid I think of the words of the preacher Peter Marshall, who said:

"May we think of freedom not as the right to do as we please but as the opportunity to do what is right."

[Dehenna Davison]

On that note, it is clear to me that some restrictions are necessary to help protect the lives of my constituents and their friends, families and loved ones.

So, from that assumption, the issue becomes what those restrictions should look like, and today we have a very simple binary choice: vote for the new tier system or not. If we choose not to vote for the new tiers, however, what is the alternative? On the table at present I see only two alternatives. The first is that the harshest national restrictions we have been living with for the past month will continue, devastating businesses and mental wellbeing across the whole country, and the second is to end restrictions completely and allow the virus to rip through our communities, with a huge human toll paid for that.

So that is the real choice that we face today. With no other alternative on the table, against the backdrop of a devastating global pandemic, and with no realistic ideal scenario, the new tier system is the least bad option, so I will be supporting it today. However, I support the system with two clear caveats that I know Ministers have heard loud and clear.

First, as I have been raising now for months, we need a more localised approach. A number of colleagues have mentioned that today and pointed to the success of hyper-localised restrictions in other countries including Germany and South Korea. I believe that we must try to replicate that approach. It is almost impossible to justify placing residents in Upper Teesdale in my constituency, where cases have consistently been far below the national average, in tier 3. I ask that at the review on 16 December a more localised approach be taken, not only for fairness but to mitigate the economic damage that we know these restrictions cause.

Secondly—I have been proudly vocal on this—support for the hospitality sector must be enhanced and improved. That must be done right away to give our landlords, restaurateurs, waitresses, bartenders, chefs and others some much-needed hope throughout the Christmas period. Today, I heard from Rima, Susan, Cathy, Cheryl and many others. Given the importance of the Christmas period for annual earnings in the hospitality sector, I urge my ministerial colleagues to check the books one last time, dig down the back of the Treasury sofa and find a proper pocket of cash. The weather over the festive period is uncertain, but I urge the Government to give us the tools to say to those in the hospitality sector, "May all your Christmases be all right."

6.35 pm

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I am delighted to be called in this debate. By chance, I am currently reading an excellent book on Churchill called "Churchill: Walking with Destiny" by Andrew Roberts, and I am absolutely gripped. Mr Roberts recounts how listening to the great man's speeches on the radio in occupied countries during the war was punishable by death,

"yet still people listened, because he could provide that one thing that these tortured populations needed more than anything else: hope"—

hope, optimism, courage and a will to stand up and take on the odds.

It grieves me to say that for many months the good people of this country, whether they live in England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, have been force-fed an hourly depressant that has left them compliant and mute. Outside the home, we are watched, warned, fined and arrested, and not just by the police, who, to be fair, are applying the law. Do not get me wrong: our political jailers are well-intentioned, but as is so often the case the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Ministers browbeaten by statistics, an apprehensive NHS and an acquiescent Europe feel obliged to tag along.

As we end this second lockdown, it is not surprising that the infection rate has dropped. It did last time, and then it rose again. No doubt, our five-day Christmas reprieve will see another spike. We know this virus well—well enough to learn to live with it. Under pressure from MPs, the Government have chosen to soften their stance with future votes and sunset clauses. Although those are welcome, I cannot vote to see more of my hard-pressed constituents move from independence to universal credit and all the other appalling consequences that befall those who lose not just their businesses and jobs but their pride. We are being lured into tiers like a child to the dentist with a promise of better things to come.

Of course, I welcome the news that we might soon have not one but three vaccines to combat the virus, but until one or all three are proven to work, we must simply stop digging a hole that we will find it hard to get out of. There is no loss of face or honour, or shame, in having a rethink. While we pontificate in here, the country drowns under wave after wave of economic ruin, sadness and desperation. It shocks me how easily this dark mantle has alighted on our shoulders. There should be choices, but not the state's. Hon. Members should ask themselves this question: has our proud island ever surrendered to the grim reaper before? The answer is no.

6.38 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): As we are debating this global pandemic, I want at the start to mention another global epidemic on World AIDS Day. I recommit Labour to ending HIV transmissions within this decade—I am sure the Secretary of State shares that commitment. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) and the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), who spoke earlier, for the launch of their commission today.

Members from across the House have spoken with insight, eloquence and sincerity. A number—the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) made this point—said that we should avoid caricaturing each other's position, and I entirely agree with that. I entirely accept that hon. Members who feel they cannot support restrictions in any form do not want to see this virus let rip; they have alternative proposals.

This has been a good debate—it has been a full day's debate—but there has been frustration on both sides of the House about the nature of the debate. I think part of that frustration is born of the way the Government brought their proposals to the House in a statutory instrument. It is a straight up-or-down vote—a binary choice. The Government could have chosen to put forward legislation, and I am sure that the House would have worked together to improve that legislation.

There have been issues in the detail of the instrument that have caused problems. We have had the ministerial muddle of the last 24 hours around Scotch eggs. If we

look at the details of the instrument, we see that a wake is allowed today, but from tomorrow wakes will not be allowed in tier 3 areas, so the provisions around wakes will be more restrictive than what is allowed today. I am sure that these anomalies and other issues could have been ironed out had the Government chosen to bring forward some legislation where we could have worked together across the House and tabled amendments.

At root, this has been a debate about freedoms—I commend the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady) for his speech about freedoms early in the debate—but also about how we balance risk; I think that is what the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Dehenna Davison) was alluding to a moment ago. All of us want to see these freedoms returned for our constituents. The first question is, at what point is it safe to start restoring freedoms to our constituents and our communities? The second question is, if we accept that freedoms have to be restricted in order to bring the prevalence of this virus down, what is the economic support in place? This House wants to save lives, but in saving lives, we are asking many of our constituents to potentially sacrifice their livelihoods. In those circumstances, our constituents—families and small businesses in our constituencies—deserve some recompense for that as well.

One theme that has come out throughout the debate is how an area will move between tiers and whether the Government are using the correct geographical footprint for tiers, but throughout this we have had different approaches. The Prime Minister's approach has ricocheted throughout. I remember when we were told that we would have a "whack-a-mole" approach. On Saturday, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, in his essay in *The Times,* said that we need to cast the widest net possible for these measures to be effective. Now, in response to questions from Back Benchers on both sides of the House, the Prime Minister says we are going to use granular detail to make very specific, localised decisions. Are we back to whack-a-mole or not?

I say to hon. Members that I have some experience of these matters. Leicester never effectively came out of the national lockdown. We went from national lockdown to local lockdown. We have bounced between versions of what today would be known as tiers 2 and 3. Our pubs were shut; our restaurants were closed. My constituents were banned from going on holiday for part of July. Using polymerase chain reaction tests, we did mass testing. We went door to door with PCR tests, and we brought our infection rate down to 25 per 100,000. We were kept in restrictions.

I have heard hon. Members stand up and argue, with sincerity, that their area should not be in tier 3 or tier 2 because its infection rate is 40 per 100,000 and that is lower than it is down the road, where it is 50 per 100,000. These are entirely legitimate points to make. Leicester remained in restrictions with its infection rate at 25 per 100,000. My question to the Secretary of State, when he comes to respond to the debate, is this. I know that he has published five criteria on which judgments will be made about the future of tiers, but will he publish specific scorecards for each area, and can he tell us at what level we should now be alarmed? Is it 40 per 100,000? Is it 35 per 100,000? That was the nationwide level when the Prime Minister introduced the rule of six on 15 September; it is 160-odd per 100,000 today.

The Secretary of State will also tell us that the answer is mass testing, and I of course pay tribute to Joe Anderson and Liverpool City Council for what they have done with the mass testing pilot. Indeed, for months we have called for targeted mass testing, but, as my hon. Friends the Members for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) and for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) have pointed out, if a community testing programme is to succeed, it needs a community isolation programme alongside it. People in low-paid jobs who are not ill and who do not think they have the virus are unlikely to take a test if they are not going to get adequate sick pay and support for their isolation. We say again to the Government: bring forward a sick pay package and ensure wider access to the £500 payment. I have also heard concerns, relating to mass testing, that the testers are not allowed to go door to door. Can the Secretary of State tell us whether that is correct?

Fundamentally, we support public health restrictions, but we cannot impose public health restrictions without giving our businesses the support to survive, and that is our difference here tonight. Give our pubs, our restaurants and our hospitality sector the grants that they need. Yes, we need to save lives, but we also need to save livelihoods.

6.45 pm

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): This debate this afternoon, and into this evening, has been on one of the great challenges of our time: how to respond as a country to this unprecedented pandemic. Our response to coronavirus has forced each and every one of us in this House to wrestle with fundamental questions of life and liberty, and to take and support measures that nobody would ever want in a liberal democracy. Like every other like-minded nation across the world, we are striving to take targeted action such as the measures before the House today. It is striking that the measures that we take in this country, and the measures in these regulations before the House, are similar in kind and seek to strike the same balance as measures in similar countries the world over. Like every like-minded nation, we face the same challenges, because this is a global challenge and a global pandemic. We seek a balance between our historic rights and our moral duty to keep one another safe, and it is not just about keeping ourselves safe. Because of the nature of this virus, it is about the importance of keeping others safe by our own actions, too.

Nobody wants to go into another national lockdown. These restrictions bring me, as a lover of freedom, no joy, but nor can we throw away all the work that we have done together to get this virus under control. With the winter ahead, and the problems that that always brings, and with the virus still at large, we must maintain our vigilance. Thanks to the incredible hard work and the sacrifices that people have made over the past four weeks, the virus is coming under control. The rates of infection are coming down, and in some parts of the country they are coming down sharply.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): The Secretary of State will know that Warrington moves from tier 3 to tier 2 tomorrow. At the start of the lockdown, we had case rates of more than 450 per 100,000. We are now at 147 per 100,00. I am sure he will join me in thanking everybody in Warrington who has worked so hard to

[Andy Carter]

bring those rates down, but can he assure me that mass testing will be made available to Warrington, as it was in Liverpool just down the road, so that we can keep Warrington in tier 2 and not bounce back up to tier 3?

Matt Hancock: Yes; I was going to say that my hon. Friend need just ask, but I think he did. I will ensure that the national team and his local team at Warrington Council are put in touch right away, if they are not in touch already, because we are extending the availability of mass testing throughout tier 3 and throughout the wider area close to Liverpool, which Warrington was in tier 3 restrictions with until we went into national lockdown.

I am sure that my hon. Friend will agree that, as the experience of Warrington and Liverpool shows, we can afford to let up a little, but we just cannot afford to let up a lot. Let that be the message that goes out from this House. We know through repeated experience what happens if the virus gets out of control. If it gets out of control, it grows exponentially, hospitals come under pressure and people die. This is not just speculation. It is a fact that has affected thousands of families, including my own. We talk a lot of the outbreak in Liverpool, and how that great city has had a terrible outbreak and got it under control. This means more to me than I can say, because last month my step-grandfather Derek caught covid there and on 18 November he died. In my family, as in so many others, we have lost a loving husband, father and grandfather to this awful disease, so from the bottom of my heart I want to say thank you to everyone in Liverpool for getting this awful virus under control. It is down by four fifths in Liverpool. That is what we can do if we work together in a spirit of common humanity. We have got to beat this and we have got to beat it together.

I know that there are costs to the actions we take—of course I know that—but let us not forget the impact of covid itself. First, there are the health impacts. People do not live with covid—we cannot learn to live with covid; people die with covid. There is also the economic impact directly from covid. Where someone has to self-isolate and their contacts have to self-isolate, that itself has an adverse impact on services in the economy. I understand why people are frustrated that it is impossible to put figures on the economic impacts, but they are uncertain and we are dealing with a pandemic that leads to so much uncertainty. The tiered system is designed specifically to be the best proportionate response we can bring together, with the minimum measures necessary to get the virus under control when it is too high, and fewer measures where prevalence is low. The only alternative is a national set of measures, which would have to be calibrated to bring the virus under control where it is high and rising, as it is in Kent right now. That is the principle behind the tiered system and why it is the best way forward this winter.

Derek Twigg: May I offer my condolences and say how sorry I am to hear of the loss in the Secretary of State's family? May I also ask him: what about the people who die because of the unintended consequences of covid, perhaps through cancer or heart disease, where they have not been seen quickly enough or have not come forward?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Gentleman, who is also from Merseyside, makes an important point. It is undoubtedly clear that the best way to preserve life among those who suffer from diseases that are not covid is to keep covid under control. Everybody who works in an NHS hospital will confirm that, because the pressures on the NHS from covid make it harder to treat cancer. In this second outbreak we have successfully managed to keep cancer services going—going at over 100% of their normal last year in many areas—thanks to the hard work of the NHS.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): My right hon. Friend is, of course, right to say that measured controls and restrictions are necessary to defeat this disease, but will he confirm that these tiers are not set in stone? Will he confirm that the review in December will, in the words of a letter he sent to me today, mean that areas will be considered within counties, on their "merits", and that action will be taken accordingly to ease those restrictions, where possible?

Matt Hancock: Yes, of course. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister set out earlier what happens if an area meets the five criteria. We have set out those five criteria: the pressures on the NHS, which we were just discussing; the case rates; the case rates in the over-60s—this is because of the direct impact that has on hospital admissions; the direction of travel of those case rates—this is because if it is rising fast, that is more dangerous; and the positivity. If an area meets the five criteria, of course we will seek to reduce the tier on that basis, and we will do that on the basis of the most localised geography that it is epidemiologically relevant to act in. This is about the human geographies that the Prime Minister spoke about with such eloquence earlier.

Let me turn to some of the many speeches that have been made, as I want to highlight a few. First, my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) gave a wise speech, talking about how there is no alternative. This phrase—"There is no alternative"—came up again, for example, from my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart). The right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) talked of the uncertainty in decision making, which was meant not as a criticism but as a description. That is something that I and those of us with the burden of decision making in this pandemic know only too well. But, as he said, there are facts, including facts about the power of vaccination, and on that he is absolutely right.

There were a number of excellent speeches from Members across the House both in favour of and against this action. I understand that reasonable people have different views on what are very difficult decisions. My right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) talked about the lesser of evils, and many talked about the decisions ahead of us not being easy because none is straightforward. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) said, it is about choosing the least damaging course to take.

I pay particular tribute to some of the newer Members of the House, including my hon. Friends the Members for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) and for Hyndburn (Sara Britcliffe), who made impassioned pleas in support of the Government. They said that it is not about doing what will win short-term popularity, but about doing

what is right, and that is the approach that we seek to take. Others asked about the publication of more data in real time. The challenge is that we publish data on the day that it comes to us, but it takes a few days to get all the results in and therefore to know the true trajectory of the disease, so there is a natural and unavoidable gap between getting the full data and the time that we are in now. That is why we look at the data from up to four days ago, because after that date, it can increase.

Many Members made points about the hospitality sector. My heart goes out to those in the hospitality sector. The Prime Minister has set out more support for wet pubs, and rightly so. The hospitality sector has benefited from more support from this Government in the pandemic than any other sector. Overall, the economic support provided by this Government has been set out by the International Monetary Fund as being one of the most generous packages in the world. We cannot support and protect all jobs, but we seek to protect as many as we can, because we can protect jobs as well as protecting lives—that is the goal. We cannot protect all lives, and we cannot protect all jobs, but we seek to protect them both.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Dehenna Davison) said that we have the right to do not what we please but what is right. In a pandemic, that is true of us all—it is true of every individual who has to choose how they act. The restrictions in these measures are not what everybody should push the boundaries of, but the limits up to which we should go, because we all have within ourselves the ability to stop the passing on of this virus to others. My hon. Friend made that point clearly struggling with the restrictions on liberty on which we vote tonight, but coming to the view that they are a lesser restriction than those we live under today, and they are a necessary restriction in order to protect life.

The consequences of inaction would be far worse than the consequences of these actions. Voting against these restrictions tonight is, in fact, a vote to allow the entire system to lapse tomorrow. I know that every Member of this House wants to control the virus, and no one wants to see the NHS overwhelmed, so support the motion to protect the NHS. Support the motion to back the nurses we all clapped in the spring. Support the motion to back the doctors working on our wards every night. Support the motion to back the teachers who are working so hard to keep our schools open, and to back the care workers looking after the most vulnerable. Support this motion to back the businesses that do not want another national lockdown, because that would be the only alternative. By voting for this motion, Members are supporting all those people and the public, who want to see us act together.

I can honestly say that from all my experience of this terrible year, this proposal draws on all the lessons and all the learnings from our experience. We have come so far in our fight against the virus. We are on the cusp of the scientific breakthroughs, the vaccines and the community testing that will let us cast aside the curbs that it demands. The end is in sight. The measures are temporary and time-limited, but no less necessary for that. The return of our freedoms is on the horizon. The virus is back under control. The NHS has been protected. Let us not throw it all away now. We must have the resolve, not to do what is easy, but to do what is right. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 291, Noes 78.

Division No. 174] **[7 pm**

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Aiken, Nickie
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Anderson, Lee
Anderson, Stuart
Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Atherton, Sarah
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Gareth
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Kemi
Bailey, Shaun
Baillie, Siobhan
Baker, Duncan
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Baron, Mr John
Baynes, Simon
Bell, Aaron
Benton, Scott
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, rh Jake
Bhatti, Saqib
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, Ben
Braverman, rh Suella
Brereton, Jack
Britcliffe, Sara
Brokenshire, rh James
Browne, Anthony
Bruce, Fiona
Buchan, Felicity
Buckland, rh Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, rh Conor
Butler, Rob
Cairns, rh Alun
Carter, Andy
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Cates, Miriam
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Churchill, Jo
Clarke, Mr Simon
Clarke, Theo
Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Clarkson, Chris
Cleverly, rh James
Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
Colburn, Elliot
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Coutinho, Claire
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crosbie, Virginia
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davison, Dehenna
Dinenage, Caroline
Dines, Miss Sarah
Docherty, Leo
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, rh Oliver
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, James
Dunne, rh Philip
Eastwood, Mark
Edwards, Ruth
Ellis, rh Michael
Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
Eustice, rh George
Evans, Dr Luke
Evennett, rh Sir David
Everitt, Ben
Fabricant, Michael
Farris, Laura
Fell, Simon
Fletcher, Katherine
Fletcher, Mark
Fletcher, Nick
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gibb, rh Nick
Gibson, Peter
Gideon, Jo
Glen, John
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Griffith, Andrew
Grundy, James
Gullis, Jonathan
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Sally-Ann
Hart, rh Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Henderson, Gordon
Henry, Darren
Higginbotham, Antony

Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Holden, Mr Richard
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holloway, Adam
Holmes, Paul
Howell, John
Howell, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, Jane
Hunt, rh Jeremy
Hunt, Tom
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkinson, Mark
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, rh Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnston, David
Jones, Andrew
Jones, Fay
Jones, Mr Marcus
Jupp, Simon
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kearns, Alicia
Keegan, Gillian
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Kruger, Danny
Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Levy, Ian
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Logan, Mark
Longhi, Marco
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Mackrory, Cherilyn
Maclean, Rachel
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Marson, Julie
Mayhew, Jerome
McCartney, Jason
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Metcalfe, Stephen
Millar, Robin
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, rh Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morrissey, Joy
Morton, Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mumby-Croft, Holly
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Nici, Lia
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, rh Jesse
O'Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Philp, Chris
Pincher, rh Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, rh Dominic
Randall, Tom
Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
Richards, Nicola
Richardson, Angela
Roberts, Rob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Rowley, Lee
Russell, Dean
Rutley, David
Sambrook, Gary
Saxby, Selaine
Scully, Paul
Seely, Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, rh Alok
Shelbrooke, rh Alec
Simmonds, David
Skidmore, rh Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Greg
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Royston
Solloway, Amanda
Spencer, rh Mark
Stafford, Alexander
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, Jane
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Streeter, Sir Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, rh Rishi
Sunderland, James
Thomas, Derek
Timpson, Edward
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
Trott, Laura
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Wallis, Dr Jamie
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Webb, Suzanne
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Wild, James
Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wood, Mike
Young, Jacob
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Maggie Throup and Michael Tomlinson

NOES

Afriyie, Adam
Ahmad Khan, Imran
Begum, Apsana
Brady, Sir Graham
Bridgen, Andrew
Bristow, Paul
Burgon, Richard
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Chope, Sir Christopher
Clark, rh Greg
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Daly, James
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Foy, Mary Kelly
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Griffiths, Kate
Gwynne, Andrew
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Hill, Mike
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Knight, Julian
Largan, Robert
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Lockhart, Carla
Loder, Chris
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Mangnall, Anthony
McCartney, Karl
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, rh Esther
Mearns, Ian
Merriman, Huw
Moore, Robbie
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, Grahame
Neill, Sir Robert
Osborne, Kate
Paisley, Ian
Pawsey, Mark
Redwood, rh John
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Smith, Henry
Spellar, rh John
Spencer, Dr Ben
Stringer, Graham
Sultana, Zarah
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Tracey, Craig
Tugendhat, Tom
Twigg, Derek
Vickers, Matt
Wakeford, Christian
Walker, Sir Charles
Wallis, Dr Jamie
Warburton, David
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy

Tellers for the Noes:
Sir Robert Syms and Mr Steve Baker

Question accordingly agreed to.

The list of Members currently certified as eligible for a proxy vote, and of the Members nominated as their proxy, is published at the end of today's debates.

Resolved,

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (All Tiers) (England) Regulations 2020 (S.I., 2020, No. 1374), dated 30 November 2020, a copy of which was laid before this House on 30 November, be approved.

7.13 pm

Proceedings interrupted.

The Deputy Speaker then put the Question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Order, this day).

Resolved,

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Local Authority Enforcement Powers) (England) Regulations 2020 (S.I., 2020, No. 1375), dated 30 November 2020, a copy of which was laid before this House on 30 November, be approved.—*(Leo Docherty.)*

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 5 to 7 together.

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

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (ANIMALS)

That the draft Import of, and Trade in, Animals and Animal Products (Miscellaneous Amendments) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020, which were laid before this House on 20 October, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (AGRICULTURE)

That the draft Official Controls (Animals, Feed and Food, Plant Health etc.) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020, which were laid before this House on 2 November, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (FAMILY LAW)

That the draft Jurisdiction, Judgments and Applicable Law (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020, which were laid before this House on 30 September, be approved.—*(Leo Docherty.)*

Question agreed to.

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

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (FOOD)

That the draft Veterinary Medicines and Residues (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020, which were laid before this House on 2 November, be approved.—*(Leo Docherty.)*

The Deputy Speaker's opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 2 December (Standing Order No. 41A).

PETITION

Support for people excluded from COVID-19 measures

7.14 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The petition is to the House of Commons.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of North Ayrshire and Arran,

Declares that there is urgent concern for around three million people who have been completely overlooked by the UK Government's support package for the COVID-19 pandemic; further declares that it is alarming that, despite the Chancellor's recent response to changing circumstances, his Winter Economic Plan continues to exclude people who already could not access the Government's financial support; further that it is an injustice to the millions of workers who have been thrown into hardship that the Government promised that "no one would be left behind"; further that the Government's commitment that it would not stop trying to find ways to support people and businesses now sounds hollow in the ears of the three million people – the self-employed, freelance workers, the newly employed as of March this year and the limited company directors – who are excluded from any and all support and are now in their eighth month with no financial assistance; and further that there is deep concern that, despite repeated arguments that the gaps in support are addressed, the UK Government has still failed to address this injustice.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to bring forward additional measures to support the three million who have been unfairly excluded from UK Government support.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002632]

HIV Commission

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Leo Docherty.)*

7.16 pm

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): Through you, Madam Deputy Speaker, I thank Mr Speaker for granting what is a special Adjournment debate on the launch of the HIV Commission, falling as it does on World AIDS Day. I am very grateful.

World AIDS Day is a campaigning moment, a day when we wear a red ribbon and, on this World AIDS Day, when we launch the final report of the HIV Commission. That is very much how I viewed it when I was the Public Health Minister, but actually World AIDS Day is a day of remembrance and reflection.

Terry Higgins, who gave his name to the Terrence Higgins Trust, was one of the first people in the UK to die of an AIDS-related illness. He was only 37 when he died in July 1982, just across the bridge from here, in St Thomas' Hospital. He was of course followed by many more. Today, we remember not only someone whose name is well known and synonymous with the fight, not only the rock star who made Live Aid what it was, but the dad, the mum, the son, the daughter, the brother, the sister, the partner, who we will never know, but those they left behind certainly did.

We also pay tribute to the HIV activists—many are still with us, and too many are not—who have never given up in their pursuit of better treatment for HIV, a cure one day, an end to new transmissions, improved services and the fight against the dreaded stigma of HIV, which still persists. The best way we can honour all those people is to refocus our efforts and to end new cases of HIV by 2030. Today, it so happens we have a plan to do just that.

In 1986, I was one year into secondary school when AIDS touched down. No one can forget seeing the tombstone advert—never mind the iceberg version, which was actually more scary—of the "Don't Die of Ignorance" campaign, with the raspy, menacing voiceover provided by the wonderful John Hurt. I want to read out the opening words of that TV commercial:

> "There is now a danger that has become a threat to us all. It is a deadly disease, and there is no known cure...Anyone can get it, man or woman. So far it has been confined to small groups, but it is spreading".

Does that sound familiar? Back in 1986, AIDS seemed to be a threat that would overwhelm us—also familiar. Those words of John Hurt that I read out—those adverts—terrified a nation, and they were meant to. I would argue that it was the most successful public health message in our history—until, perhaps,

> "Stay at home. Protect the NHS. Save lives."

Fast forward 30 years and I find myself, much to my surprise, the Public Health Minister with the opportunity to put what has become scientifically possible—ending new cases of HIV by 2030—into policy. When we first proposed the idea to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State—I am deeply touched that he is here to respond to the debate, today of all days—it was not a tough sell. We had already done so much as a country, meeting the UNAIDS 90-90-90 targets on testing, treatment and early suppression, and the Secretary of State understands that prevention is better than cure more than most. It was terrific to watch him tell the AIDS-free cities global forum in London in January 2019 that this Government would set themselves the ambitious—but we think wholly achievable—goal of today's commission. Just as Lord Fowler, in 1986, as Secretary of State for Health and Social Security, rejected a moral crusade against a way of life in favour of a practical plan to fight a virus, so we, in creating the HIV Commission, turned the possible into policy and the policy into this practical plan.

I pay tribute to Dame Inga Beale, who chaired the commission with a firm hand and great style, as well as the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) and the eight other commissioners, who put so much into producing what we launched this morning, with the help of—wearing a fabulous jacket, if I may say so—Sir Elton John. I also pay tribute to the three CEOs who made this possible—Ian Green of the Terrence Higgins Trust, Deborah Gold of the National AIDS Trust and Anne Aslett of the Elton John AIDS foundation; thank you so much. I also pay tribute to many, including the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on HIV and AIDS, the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), and my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer) who cannot speak this evening, who have done so much to assist us in this journey.

The prize is clear: England could be the first country to end new cases of HIV, and we can help the world do the same.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): It has been such a privilege being a member of the independent HIV Commission, not least because of the wide range of people we have met and engaged with during our work. That has helped us to put together a concrete action plan that could help us, if we get this right, to end HIV transmissions by 2030. That is such an enormous prize.

I want to join my hon. Friend in thanking everyone who took part in the commission, particularly the chair, Inga Beale, for her wonderful leadership. If I may do so from the Opposition Benches, I want to thank the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care for being in the Chamber this evening to respond to the debate. We have seen great cross-party leadership from him and from the Leader of the Opposition—the leader of my party. Therein lies the hope that, with joined-up political leadership locally and nationally, we will turn the report into not just a worthy piece of work, but a concrete plan of action that changes people's lives and changes the course of history.

Steve Brine: I bless my hon. Friend for that. It has been a pleasure to work with him on the commission. He has Front-Bench responsibilities himself and it is a big commitment. We had to be sure that that commitment would lead to something proper, something realistic, something deliverable; and I do not think we could have asked for better in the plan that has been produced. The cross-party element is so important. There is no room for an inch of partisanship in the all-party parliamentary group for HIV and AIDS in this fight because, whatever happens at the 2024 general election, we cannot reset after that election if there should be a change of Administration; we need to keep up the focus and keep working across the House. I give way to the Chair of the all-party group.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I absolutely commend the hon. Gentleman's work and leadership on this, not only as a Minister but as a member of the commission. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), the Secretary of State, and the Health Ministers in the devolved Administrations as well—including my colleague Vaughan Gething, the Health Minister in Wales—because it is only with leadership on this issue and cross-party working, and cross-UK working, that we will get to that crucial target of zero infections by 2030. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, as with so many public health issues, this is a global fight as well, and that our continued support as a country for things such as the UN Global Fund is crucial to getting to that 2030 target globally, as well as in this country?

Steve Brine: I most certainly do. As a Health Minister I travelled around the world to G7 and G20 meetings. The NHS and what we do within it, as the Health Secretary has said many times, is so well respected around the world that we often set the tone and the lead. Yes, this is a plan for England, but I hope it will work across the devolved nations of the UK. I hope that we will set the standard around the world, as we have in so many areas of public health policy, so that others will then follow. I take the hon. Gentleman's point exactly.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. I just want to add my support for the HIV Commission project; I spoke to him beforehand. It is important that we put on record the hard work that has been done by so many people, including by those in my constituency. The Elim Church's missions have helped to address HIV in Swaziland. Over the years I have known them and what they have done, they have been instrumental—it is a wonderful thing—in assisting the Swazi Government to reduce the number of adults who have HIV from 50% to 27%. A programme of education and medical support has helped. Does he agree that what has been done in Swaziland could enable us, through the House of Commons, to deliver that to the rest of the world as well?

Steve Brine: Yes. The faith element is very important. We have done very well on driving down the numbers, but we have to do even better, and it will get harder as we get closer to the goal. The Rev. Steve Chalke, a Baptist minister and the founder of the Oasis charitable trust, was one of our commissioners. He provided a very important element and the hon. Gentleman's point is very valid.

Why do I say that this is scientifically possible? An HIV diagnosis is a notification of a serious condition, but these days, thank goodness, it is not the death sentence it once was and many still understand it to be. An end is therefore in sight. Treatment has come such a long way. People on the right treatment have their viral load suppressed, meaning that they cannot pass on HIV. That, frankly, was a game changer. Overwhelmingly, people in England and the UK now know their HIV status. Of the 106,000 people with HIV in our country today, 94% know they are HIV positive, 98% are on treatment, and nearly all are virally suppressed and therefore cannot pass it on.

In addition, we have a wonder drug, PrEP—pre-exposure prophylaxis—which is taken by people who are HIV negative. It stops transmission during sexual intercourse. The PrEP impact trial data comes out in the new year, but we know already that it is a massive success—I hope I am proved right in that assertion. The Secretary of State made the drug readily available, free on the NHS—that was important. It took a little longer than it might have done but, legal challenges notwithstanding, let us not dwell on old ground. Let us ensure that all communities that can benefit from the drug know about its virtues and its availability.

If we are to get the benefits of PrEP to all who need them, HIV testing is needed in GP surgeries, pharmacies—I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests—termination clinics, gender clinics and much more besides. Then, PrEP prescribing powers need to be given to each of those bodies. Again, it can be done—we need the will to do it. I commend the PrEP Protects campaign, focusing on black African women and men. If we can get take-up in other communities as there has been among gay and bisexual men, we will be changing lives and saving money. So thank you to the Terrence Higgins Trust, the National AIDS Trust, I Want PrEP Now, who lobbied me heavily as a Minister, and PrEPster for their amazing campaigns on the issue.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I thank the hon. Gentleman very much for giving way. Does he commend the efforts of community groups who are going out and selling that message to their own communities? Those who work for Waverley Care in Glasgow and the Hwupenyu Health and Wellbeing Project are making sure that the message gets out into the community.

Steve Brine: Absolutely. The big society groups have been so important to the work of the commission. We have heard from many of them and I know they are very important north of the border, so I thank the hon. Lady for putting them on the record.

With the cavalry—the science—in place and the policy agreed, we needed a practical plan. For 18 months, the commission met, listened, learned and deliberated. Its recommendations are clear and I will close with a few of them. The first benchmark is to get new instances and the number of people undiagnosed down by 80% by 2025. Most of those will be in communities we already work with to reduce HIV transmissions, but the last 20% most likely will not. They will be hard to find, but the rewards will be great.

Secondly, we want Ministers to report to Parliament annually on the 2025 target and the 2030 goal. This will focus minds and track progress. To make these kinds of advances, we need the promised HIV action plan in very short order.

Thirdly, HIV testing—this is the crucial bit—must become normalised in the system. No longer should 250,000 people go to a sexual health clinic and not be offered a test, but we must go so much further. When someone presents at A&E or registers with a GP and the NHS or whoever else is taking blood, an HIV test must be carried out—so not opt-in, but opt-out. The default assumption is that it will happen.

We know that that can happen. Maternity services have shown that it is possible. Midwives test pregnant women for HIV, in non-judgmental settings, and there

[Steve Brine]

is a 99% take-up and therefore near zero vertical transmission to newborn babies. It could be the same elsewhere if we get this right, but there are many challenges in doing that. The funding is with local government. The testing needs to happen in primary care as well as secondary, but it is all possible with political will. In short, it is a policy of test, test, test, and if ever there was a time when we can successfully land that message, it is surely at the end of this ghastly 2020.

Underneath these recommendations lies a 20-point action plan to bring all this to life. Rarely has a commission been presented with such an implementation-friendly set of actions. If the Government are minded—and they have one or two other things on their plate right now—they could do a lot worse than copy and paste our findings into the first draft of the aforementioned HIV action plan. Each action is assessed for its impact on health inequalities and its contribution to fighting stigma. It looks to everyone who is and could be affected by HIV, and that was important to us. We are not denying that some of this will require investment, but I think that it is investment worth making, because bluntly, it will change and save lives, and we have shown how to do that after the Government asked us to.

If the moral case does not persuade people listening to this debate, hard cash might. Modelling by the Elton John AIDS Foundation found that over £200,000 in future healthcare costs was saved per person who was diagnosed and linked into the right treatment and care, so, not unlike the dynamic we face in cancer care, early diagnosis is the magic key in HIV as well.

Finally, to the wider sector, I say this: I hope that we have done you proud in our work with the HIV Commission. You got us here. We now need to come together to get this done. To my colleagues in the House tonight and listening elsewhere who will join us in campaigning for exactly what we are asking, I say: many thanks in advance. We will be in contact.

We could end HIV transmission on our watch. How amazing would that be to that 12-year-old schoolboy and many others who saw that advert in 1986? Let us not pass up the opportunity and, with this man as Secretary of State, I do not think we will.

7.32 pm

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): Just a few minutes ago at this Dispatch Box, I was here to update the House on the national effort to fight the new pandemic of our times. As we grapple with this pandemic of coronavirus, so too we need to look today at both the progress we have made and the progress still needed, to mourn the loss of those who have been taken from us, and to redouble our efforts in our fight against another killer pandemic, HIV.

Just like coronavirus, HIV was a challenge for humanity that, at times, especially early on, seemed almost impossible to surmount, but thanks to the ingenuity of scientists, the compassion of healthcare professionals and the determination of people living with HIV and their loved ones, we have made so much progress against this disease. So today, on World AIDS Day, let us all commit ourselves, across the House and in all parts of our country, to standing firm against the disease that threatens us and declare that we will give it no ground.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) for securing the debate. He worked tirelessly on this issue when he was a ministerial colleague—a brilliant Public Health Minister—and I want to tell the House in all honesty that he was absolutely pivotal to so many of the achievements and aspirations that we are discussing today. Without him, I wonder whether the 2030 commitment could have been made. We should all be grateful to him for his dedicated work in office and his continued powerful advocacy. He mentioned the "Don't Die of Ignorance" campaign and I can tell him and the House that the early messaging in the coronavirus pandemic, including "Stay at home", was explicitly inspired by that campaign, which was so successful and so brave.

Every day when I walk into my Department, I walk past a list of my predecessors on the wall, and I feel honoured to follow in the footsteps of Lord Fowler, who did so much to tackle this pernicious virus and who, in particular, took a view and made a judgment that we must face it on the basis of compassion and science. That was central to the decision that this country took all those years ago, and I am glad to say that we have followed it ever since.

We have made significant progress since those dark days when, as my hon. Friend said, HIV was a death sentence for so many. Now, if diagnosed early and with access to appropriate treatments, the majority of people with HIV in this country can have a life expectancy that is close to normal. I am so proud that, here, the overall number of people with a new HIV diagnosis has fallen by over a third over the past five years and the number of gay and bisexual men with newly diagnosed HIV has fallen to its lowest point in 20 years. I am also really proud that, through the efforts of so many people, we have met our UNAIDS 90-90-90 target for the third consecutive year, and that we were one of the first countries in the world to do so. That means more than 90% of people who live with HIV being diagnosed, more than 90% of those diagnosed getting treatment, and more than 90% of those who are treated having quantities of HIV that are so small that it is undetectable.

Alison Thewliss: The Secretary of State is talking about the excellent progress that has been made, and I acknowledge that that is true, but one area where there is still significant difficulty is among intravenous drug users, particularly in the city of Glasgow. We want the public health intervention of a supervised drug injection facility, but the Home Office is blocking this. Does he agree that there needs to be a public health approach to this, otherwise we will not be able to treat those remaining percentages of people who still have the virus?

Matt Hancock: I was about to say that despite the successes, there is further to go and we would all agree on that. We need to follow the evidence of what works and, crucially, we need to work together. I know that the Home Secretary has been working with the Administration in Scotland on the approach to be taken. The attitude that we should have is that every new case of HIV is one case too many.

That brings me to the commitment that we were able to make two years ago. At the suggestion of my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester, I announced the commitment to ending new HIV transmissions by 2030.

I remember being told at the time that this was an ambitious target, but I know that we can get there. This year, we have been making PrEP routinely available across England to those who need it, and have backed that with funding for local authorities. None the less, it is really this report from the HIV Commission that shows us the way. I want to thank all those who have been involved—the Terrence Higgins Trust, of course; the National AIDS Trust; the Elton John AIDS Foundation; Public Health England—and I am grateful for the work across the devolved Administrations. I also take this opportunity to thank Sir Elton for his exceptional personal advocacy for people living with HIV and the sterling work that he has done to raise money for HIV prevention and treatment across the world, and to thank all those who have played their part in getting us to where we are.

Let me turn now to the work of the commission itself. I know that colleagues across the House have played an active role in it. The report that the commission has published today makes many important recommendations for how we can progress on our path to zero. I pay tribute to all the commissioners for their hard work and thank each and every one of them, and I wish to put on record my thanks and praise for Dame Inga Beale for her expert leadership.

My hon. Friend set out the core recommendations, which include the interim milestone of an 80% reduction in new HIV transmissions by 2025, early diagnosis at the core of the approach we should take, and the default assumption of test, test, test—that sounds familiar, and we know that it works—as well, of course, as the expansion of testing.

The reason I wanted to come to the House personally tonight was so I could say this: we will use the excellent report of the HIV Commission as the basis of our upcoming HIV action plan, which I commit to publishing next year. I want that to be as early next year as is feasible to ensure that the work is high-quality, can be delivered and can set us fair on a credible path to zero new transmissions in 2030. I look forward to working with Members from all parts of the House in making that happen.

Stephen Doughty: May I, on behalf of the all-party parliamentary group, thank the Secretary of State for that commitment, which is absolutely crucial? I know it will be welcomed by my predecessor, who cannot speak here. Will the Secretary of State also commit to doing all we can do as a country, working with his colleagues at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and elsewhere, not only to ensure that our commitments globally are met in the UN Global Fund, but to support the world-beating research that goes on in, for instance, the international AIDS vaccine initiative at Imperial College, which is leading the way towards treatments and vaccines not only for HIV but for so many other infectious diseases, including covid?

Matt Hancock: The cross-party nature of the support for this work could not be better demonstrated than by the fact that when our colleague from the Scottish National party, the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) intervened, she anticipated my very next sentence, and so has the hon. Gentleman. I wanted immediately to turn to the global matters, because no one is safe until everyone is safe. If we have learned anything this year, we have learned that. We also need to work on shared solutions together and across the world, and we as a country will lean into the global efforts to tackle HIV and AIDS, as we have done under Governments of all persuasions over the past three and a half decades.

Jim Shannon: In my intervention on the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), I referred to the good work that has been done in Swaziland. From a global point of view, I just wonder whether the Secretary of State will be able to make contact with Swaziland and see how it has reduced the numbers.

Matt Hancock: I would be very happy to ensure that that happens and to work with the hon. Gentleman on a subject that I know is close to his heart. I reiterate that over the past three and a half decades, here in the UK we have played our part in supporting efforts right around the world. I am proud that we are the world's second-largest donor to the Global Fund, which is reallocating up to $1 billion to support the prevention and treatment of HIV and other threats to global public health during the pandemic. We have to make sure that work goes on, even in the clutches of another public health emergency. It is absolutely critical that we do not let up, because we cannot let one virus undo the progress we are making in fighting another.

Today is a day to look back and remember those we have lost to HIV. It is a day to look back and acknowledge the progress we have made, but it is also a day to look forward and together reaffirm our resolve to keep working towards that goal of no new infections in 2030, because HIV is a virus that has taken too many people before their time. We should all redouble our efforts to make it a thing of the past.

Question put and agreed to.

7.43 pm

House adjourned.

Members Eligible for a Proxy Vote

The following is the list of Members currently certified as eligible for a proxy vote, and of the Members nominated as their proxy:

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Nigel Adams (Selby and Ainsty) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con)	Mark Spencer
Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Stuart Anderson (Wolverhampton South West) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab)	Kim Johnson
Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Margaret Beckett (Derby South) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Saqib Bhatti (Meriden) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Suella Braverman (Fareham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
James Brokenshire (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudon) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Anthony Browne (South Cambridgeshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Conor Burns (Bournemouth West) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP)	Patrick Grady

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP)	Gavin Robinson
Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Theo Clarke (Stafford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dr Thérèse Coffey (Suffolk Coastal) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Geoffrey Cox (Torridge and West Devon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con)	Rebecca Harris
Jon Cruddas (Dagenham and Rainham) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Mims Davies (Mid Sussex) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Marsha De Cordova (Battersea)	Rachel Hopkins
Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Miss Sarah Dines (Derbyshire Dales) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Allan Dorans (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Ms Nadine Dorries (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP)	Patrick Grady
Mark Eastwood (Dewsbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ruth Edwards (Rushcliffe) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
George Eustice (Camborne and Redruth) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Laura Farris (Newbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance)	Wendy Chamberlain
Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind)	Jonathan Edwards
Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP)	Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson
John Glen (Salisbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mr Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Michael Gove (Surrey Heath) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Damian Green (Ashford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kate Griffiths (Burton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
James Grundy (Leigh) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab)	Graham Stringer
Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con)	Rebecca Harris
Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Matt Hancock (West Suffolk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP)	Ben Lake
Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
James Heappey (Wells) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Chris Heaton-Harris (Daventry) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gordon Henderson (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
John Howell (Henley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Boris Johnson (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Fay Jones (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Robert Largan (High Peak) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con)	Mr William Wragg
Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ian Levy (Blyth Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Brandon Lewis (Great Yarmouth) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP)	Sir Jeffrey Donaldson
Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con)	Robbie Moore
Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Jonathan Lord (Woking) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP)	Patrick Grady

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Shabana Mahmood (Birmingham, Ladywood) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Alan Mak (Havant) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Julie Marson (Hertford and Stortford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab)	Kim Johnson
Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West)	Patrick Grady
Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Penny Mordaunt (Portsmouth North) (Con)	Mark Spencer
Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Lia Nici (Great Grimsby) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con)	Rebecca Harris
Guy Opperman (Hexham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op)	Rachel Hopkins
Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP)	Sammy Wilson
Priti Patel (Witham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con)	Peter Aldous
Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Will Quince (Colchester) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Nicola Richards (West Bromwich East) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Rob Roberts (Delyn) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Gary Sambrook (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab)	Stuart Andrew
Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd)	Ben Lake
Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con)	Rebecca Harris
Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Grant Shapps (Welwyn Hatfield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alok Sharma (Reading West) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Chloe Smith (Norwich North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Royston Smith (Southampton, Itchen) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Amanda Solloway (Derby North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Jane Stevenson (Wolverhampton North East) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Sir Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mel Stride (Central Devon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Edward Timpson (Eddisbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Elizabeth Truss (South West Norfolk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mr Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Ben Wallace (Wyre and Preston North)	Stuart Andrew
Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Suzanne Webb (Stourbridge) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Claudia Webbe (Leicester East) (Ind)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mrs Heather Wheeler (South Derbyshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
John Whittingdale (Malden) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Craig Williams (Montgomeryshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC)	Ben Lake
Gavin Williamson (Montgomeryshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab)	Rachel Hopkins
Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nadhim Zahawi (Stratford-on-Avon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 1 December 2020

[Sir Christopher Chope *in the Chair*]

Cancer in Teenagers and Young Adults

9.30 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of raising awareness of signs and symptoms of cancer in teenagers and young adults.

It is a pleasure to have this debate, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for making it possible. I have a number of debates lined up with the Committee, and it asked me the week before last which debate I wanted to do. That is a very difficult question, because there are others that have been lined up since April or May, so I said, "I can't make my mind up. I will leave it to you." The Committee chose this subject, and I am very happy to speak on it.

I am my party's health spokesperson, and this issue is very close to my heart. That is perhaps because, over the years, as an elected representative, I have had the opportunity to speak to constituents who are very clear about what the issues are for them. Cancer in teenagers and young adults is very important because sometimes children have been healed, and sometimes they have not.

Far too often, young people are forgotten when it comes to the conversation around cancer. Today's debate offers a great opportunity to highlight the issues young cancer patients face, helping us all to explore how we can increase the understanding of signs and symptoms of cancer in their age group, and how to support their specific needs, experience, survival and recovery from cancer.

The importance of the debate was made clear to me by the Teenage Cancer Trust, a charity that is very close to my heart and that I have supported frequently over the years. The Teenage Cancer Trust is the only UK charity dedicated entirely to improving the quality of life for 13 to 24-year-olds with cancer. It helps the seven young people who are diagnosed with cancer every day of the year, supporting them through treatment and beyond. The Teenage Cancer Trust has specialist units in NHS hospitals and provides dedicated staff, including specialist nurses and youth support co-ordinators. It is important to have specialist nurses and youth support co-ordinators in place to offer that umbrella of support when it is needed. The charity has 28 units across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and uses the charitable funds it raises to provide over 90 specialist staff posts.

This year, after noticing the worrying drop in cancer referrals across the first lockdown, the Teenage Cancer Trust ran the "best to check" campaign, which was supported by a large number of MPs, on social media. Many MPs in this House and many Members of the devolved Administrations were involved in that social media campaign. The aim of the campaign was to highlight the specific signs and symptoms of cancer in young people and, importantly, to encourage young people to speak to their GPs or other healthcare professionals if they were concerned, with the message that, if in doubt, it is best to check. It is a good campaign, because it highlights the issues well.

An important point to raise today is that young people with cancer are different from children and older adults. While, fortunately, cancer in teenagers and young adults is rare, compared with cancer in older adults, it is still the biggest killer of young people by disease. This week in Westminster Hall and in the Chamber, we will have a number of debates about cancer, which is something we have highlighted over the last period.

It is always a pleasure to see the Minister in her place, because she has personal experience, but also a knowledge of the subject matter, and I look forward to her response. I also look forward to hearing from the shadow Ministers and from other hon. Members today.

It is always important to remember that cancer is still the biggest killer of young people by disease, because we focus very much on older people in our constituencies who come to see us. My father had cancer on three occasions; the first time, the specialist told my mother, "Go home and get your affairs in order," yet he survived that. I have a similar outlook in life, both spiritually and in understanding, to my hon. Friend from the Scottish National party, the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden). We believe in prayer. At that time, prayer was a big thing, and I believe it changed the outcome for my father. It was the skill of the surgeon and the care of nurses along with the prayers of God's people and others that brought him through. He lived 34 years after he was first diagnosed. For a man who was told that his life was over, it is clear what happened. He had two more bouts of cancer and survived them too.

Young people experience a pattern of cancer types distinct from those faced by children and older adults. Typically they are the types of cancer that are considered rarer than those we are most used to hearing about in older adults. It is important that we focus on that. These cancers include the lipomas, the leukaemias, the sarcomas and the germ-cell tumours that are often harder to diagnose than the cancers faced by those in older age groups. We regularly see on television adverts from Great Ormond Street children's hospital, and when I see young children suffering from cancer at a very early age, it always make me focus on the young people who have to deal with the disease. For example, a couple on television this morning told a very personal story. The case of children who have not had the chance to see all of life resonates very much with us and is close to our hearts.

Alongside that, it is important to recognise that young people with cancer have a distinct and highly significant set of social and emotional needs. Perhaps they do not always understand what has happened to them. They depend on the love of their parents and their families, and the skill of the nurses and their love as well. The normal challenges facing all adolescents and emerging adults still have to be faced by a young person with cancer. Along with the changes that they face, they have to deal with some of the bigger issues.

Young people are at a stage when their brain is still developing. That means that they will interpret and manage their diagnosis and the treatment of cancer differently. Experiencing cancer at the same time as puberty can have an effect on the physical transformations that are taking place. Cancer can have a number of

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unique physical and social impacts on a young person, and that can affect their identity, sense of self and body image. As the father of three young boys growing up, I was very aware of the difficulties and changes in children. Now I have the pleasure of having grandchildren and watching them growing up. All the things that I did not do right for the children I can perhaps get right for the grandchildren. My wife might say, "That'll be a big thing for you," so we will see how it goes.

Cancer can disrupt young people's attendance at school, their romantic relationships and their interactions with peers at a crucial time in their development. The Teenage Cancer Trust funds youth support co-ordinators who are specialists, who help young people through all aspects of their care.

Young people with cancer face many barriers when needing a swift and accurate diagnosis. An issue both before and during the coronavirus pandemic is the challenge of getting age-specific data on cancer referrals. That is one of the things that we perhaps have not been able to do accurately. I understand the pressures that Ministers and Departments face, but data are not just figures. Data enable us to look at trends and to focus on them. It is important that we have age-specific data.

Statistics on cancer waiting times are broken down by trust and cancer type, but not by age, which is rather unfortunate. When the Minister replies, perhaps she will give us an indication of how improvements can take place. If we had such improvements for age data, we could focus our efforts on how best to address the issue. It is difficult to understand the full impact of coronavirus on access to the system for young people with cancer, but there is no benchmark for comparison in the first place. We cannot even compare with what happened before because the statistics are not in place. It is important that we get them.

Data from the national cancer patient experience survey in 2018 showed that young people were the group most likely to sit on concerns about their body for more than 12 months before presenting to a doctor. We have to address that. If young people are not sure what is wrong and what the changes in their bodies are, they need to be encouraged to speak to their parents and their GP and to feel free to do that, just to check and be sure. I will shortly give one example or perhaps a couple of examples of where doing things that way probably saved people's lives.

Data from the national cancer patient experience survey and surveys conducted by the Teenage Cancer Trust also show that, compared with older adults, young people with cancer are the group most likely to have to present to GPs or healthcare professionals three or more times before they end up getting a referral and a diagnosis. How many times have we heard that people have gone to see their GP and presented their case, but the GP—I am not being critical—has never been able to indicate exactly what is wrong at an early stage, when the symptoms are perhaps clearly saying it? That is why people go back perhaps two or three times.

As I said, I will give an example of one young person, and I will give just her first name. The Teenage Cancer Trust hears these stories frequently. In June 2019, a young person named Alex was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukaemia. She was 13 years old. Her symptoms started as back pain. When she presented her symptoms to the GP, she was told to take paracetamol and ibuprofen and to keep an eye on it. A week later, she was still having persistent severe back pain, but she had also developed a rash and unusual bruising. Luckily, her GP told her to go to the A&E department for a test, and that was probably what saved her life. Following that, Alex was told that she had cancer.

Alex is now on maintenance treatment and wants to share with other young people the message that if they go to their doctor once and something still feels wrong afterwards, it is important to keep going and asking for help. It might seem silly to do that, but it is essential. If someone has a persistent pain or problem, they must go back to their doctor. What made young Alex persevere was knowing that she would be able to stop guessing once she found out what was wrong. Alex's story is one of many with a similar message.

Studies such as that by Herbert et al in 2018 have shown that GPs are often not familiar with cancer in teenagers and young adults because of its relative rareness, so their suspicion is low. I know that GPs are confronted every day with different issues, and I understand that, sometimes, with the rapidity of issues, it might not always be possible to know exactly what the problem is. It is often thought that young people are too young to get cancer. No, they are not. It is important that that is said today.

Interestingly, the BRIGHTLIGHT cohort study has highlighted that sociodemographic factors and tumour type significantly influenced primary care referral rates and time to diagnosis. BRIGHTLIGHT has done excellent work, and it is good to have that on the record.

Following on from that, it is timely to raise the issues that coronavirus has caused for teenagers and young adults with cancer. At the height of the coronavirus pandemic, around the time of the first national lockdown, cancer referrals from GPs dramatically reduced for all age groups. It would be great to think that that was just because cancer problems and the need for diagnosis had dropped, but that was not the reason. Cancer referrals were down by as much as 75% across all age groups—adults, young adults and children—as people stayed at home to prevent the spread of coronavirus. People were obviously afraid. They would think, "If I have a chronic disease and I go to the hospital or my GP, I might find that I have coronavirus as a result of that."

There are potentially thousands of undiagnosed people who otherwise would have been diagnosed, and I think that other debates this week will indicate that as well. There is concern, too, about the particular challenges from the increased demand during the winter period. We cannot ignore that, because the winter period will bring its own problems as it always does. As one who had the flu jab back in September, I understand how important that is. I was never convinced at the beginning that it was really important, but as a type 2 diabetic, I now understand that there is a purpose to it. I have no doubt at all that the flu jab has helped me and many others.

As I said, there is concern about the particular challenges from the increased demand during the winter period. We also have to look at wider access to services for young people with cancer and at how that can work and how we can do it better, because it is important that we do so. Much of the support for young people with

cancer has had to move online during the pandemic. That suits some people, but not everyone. While there has been some excellent adaptation and innovation, it cannot fully replace one-to-one support. While online is important, it is not the answer to it all.

It is encouraging to see the pick-up in referral rates across age groups in the latter part of the year. The NHS Help Us, Help You public awareness campaign is welcome. Some of these campaigns are really important, and we have to thank the Minister and the Health Department for campaigns that raise awareness. It is important that that happens.

During the first lockdown, the Teenage Cancer Trust found that young people with cancer found that accessing members of their treatment team much more challenging, particularly for rehabilitation and emotional support. We often say this—there are not many debates when we do not—but the issue is not always the physical part; it is also the mental and emotional wellbeing, the social interaction and the help of families. My goodness, how much we depend on our families for support as well. The trust's findings show that 69% of young people were seeing their physiotherapist less frequently than usual, and 53% of young people were seeing their psychologist less often than normal. Those figures tell their own story of the fall-downs.

For many of these young people, the impacts of covid-19 and cancer are a massive double whammy. For those in treatment, coronavirus has exacerbated what is already a horrible situation and made it even more isolating and scary. Those young people who do not have the support of family and friends find it a very lonely road to chart a way down. I hope the Minister will give us some ideas in her response about how we can help these young people with their emotional and wellbeing.

For those at the end of treatment, coronavirus has extended some of the most difficult pressures of cancer treatment, which they thought they were finally breaking clear from, such as missing friends, family work and education. I support the Government's campaign here and in Northern Ireland, where the issue is devolved, to have children at school. It is really important to do that where possible. We can probably do education at home and online by Zoom, but there is not the contact. I watched a TV programme last week where four children from a school back home were asked how important interaction in class was to them. They all said the same thing: they need that social contact. That is very important to have a normal life.

Another young person, Darcy, was diagnosed with skin cancer in February this year, at the age of 21. Her diagnosis came after her mum noticed a mole on her collar bone that was growing and getting darker. Like Alex, Darcy was originally turned away by her GP, who thought the changes were nothing to worry about. That is not a criticism; it is a reality. Luckily, because Darcy knew that something was not right, she decided to go back. She was persistent, and her mother was persistent as well. Her mole was removed and tested, and Darcy was diagnosed with skin cancer.

Coronavirus changed Darcy's experience of cancer, as the UK entered lockdown soon after her diagnosis. She was one of the fortunate ones who had a diagnosis early and was treated before coronavirus came in. Coronavirus has amplified the issue of young people being forgotten in the conversation about cancer. Due to infection control restrictions as a result of coronavirus, many young people with cancer have to face treatment without someone there with them.

We have had many such debates in Westminster Hall and in the main Chamber. We had a Westminster Hall debate about month ago about miscarriages and losing young babies and children. It was a very emotional debate, full of raw emotion from all those who participated with personal stories. One person in particular—I do not think I will ever forget her contribution—told her story for the first time. Her story was that she had lost her child during the coronavirus pandemic, and it had happened only three months previously. She told the story, from that chair, not so long ago. It told me how important it is to have someone there. Because of the coronavirus, she had not seen her mother since she lost the baby. The special contact that mothers have with daughters was lost for a period of time, so it is important to have that in place. The restrictions are there, of course, in the interests of safety and stopping the spread of virus, but young people with cancer report that they are increasingly struggling with the impact of having to face some of that treatment alone. I underline that again, as it is really important.

It is important to raise several other issues faced by young people with cancer, one of which is access to clinical trials. Perhaps the Minister will agree that we should be trying to address that. Access to clinical trials can improve survival rates, outcomes and quality of life. Teenagers and young adults are, however, significantly under-represented in cancer research. We do need to do something in that department, and it is important that we do that. If young people are involved in clinical trials, we can improve cancer research, thereby improving the results. Recruitment rates in the UK among 15 to 24-year-olds are between 14% and 30%, compared with a rate of 50% to 70% in paediatrics. That tells me something. Those facts are stark, and we need to address that.

Another key issue is the impact that cancer can have on the mental health of a young person. I said it earlier on and I say it again. CLIC Sargent's 2017 "Hidden Costs" report on young cancer patients showed that 70% had experienced depression, 90% had experienced anxiety and 42% had experienced panic attacks during treatment. Despite that, many young people with cancer cannot access the psychological support that they need. Research by the Teenage Cancer Trust in 2018 showed that only 61% of young people said they had access to a psychologist or a counsellor throughout their cancer treatment. That figure fell to 44% after the treatment had finished. We really need to do something with that sector. It is crucial that every young person with cancer who needs it gets support from a mental health professional, from diagnosis through treatment to aftercare: from the beginning of the process to its end.

Cancer in young people may be rare when compared to cancer in adulthood, but it is still the biggest killer of young people by disease. Cancer awareness now forms part of the health education curriculum in schools in England. That is welcome, but education about lifestyle choices to prevent cancer in adulthood does not go far enough to help young people to understand the signs and symptoms of cancer in their own age group that are

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not down to lifestyle. It is important that we realise that. Cancer can come and strike hard when it is least expected. Young people with cancer need to be equipped with knowledge about the signs and symptoms of cancer in their age group, and empowered to visit a doctor when they think that something is wrong. Perhaps the Minister can give a follow-up in her response on how that education programme is going. It is a good idea, by the way. It is fantastic, and I highly welcome it, but I think, ever more mindful of the difficulties in education due to coronavirus, that the follow-on is important. Hopefully life will change in the new year, when the vaccine is more available and we have a better opportunity to take advantage of it. I am not quite sure what the new normal will be, but we do look for some sort of normality for the future. More widely, young people with cancer are consistently forgotten in the cancer conversation, so it is important that awareness of the issues faced by young people with cancer is raised. If data on referrals and diagnosis risks by age is not publicly available, however, difficulties in knowing where to effectively target interventions will continue. The specific needs of young people with cancer must be considered. Public awareness activity on cancer needs to include reference to the specific types of cancer that are more prevalent in young people. If we can focus on cancers that are more prevalent, we can give advice, raise awareness and encourage young people to act at an early stage.

Finally, general practitioners and healthcare professionals should be encouraged to refer young people who present possible cancer symptoms for tests, even if the suspicion is on the lower side. If they are in any doubt whatsoever, it is always better to check this than to just sit on it. Thank you for this opportunity, Sir Christopher. I look forward to hearing contributions from right hon. and hon. Members, who have plenty of time to do so.

9.55 am

Imran Ahmad Khan (Wakefield) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I thank my friend—for he is one—the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing today's important debate, and I hope it raises further awareness of this important issue. As my friend so poignantly illustrated, we have all sacrificed a great deal in the fight against coronavirus. Lockdown and the ensuing restrictions, which we continue to endure, have had a seismic impact on the services that the NHS can provide, none more so than cancer services.

Cancer is sadly the leading cause of death from disease for those aged between 13 and 24. Every day, seven young people between these ages in the United Kingdom receive the devastating news that they have cancer. I remember all too well a young family friend, Daniel Illias, a son and brother, who died from cancer as a teenager. It was particularly difficult as he received treatment at the same time, in the same hospital and with the same medical team as my own father. My father was 59 at the time, with prostate cancer. I remember going in and often seeing them, despite the age difference, playing chess or chatting about theology and other issues; the bond between the two was particularly strong. The day that his father telephoned to let me know that Daniel had died, and I had to go up to my father, in his bed, to let him know, was an awful, difficult day indeed.

My dearest friend, Will James, died of bowel cancer at just 26, only months after marrying his new, beloved wife Jen. We had just been celebrating his wedding. I think of Will every day.

It is only through early diagnosis that lives can be saved and complications can be prevented. Young people have been profoundly hit by the lack of cancer treatment as a consequence of the response to covid-19, whether in diagnosis, operations, chemotherapy, or radiotherapy. Cancer Research UK has highlighted that thousands fewer people are being referred for hospital tests, especially for lung and prostate cancer. According to Dr Louise Soanes, director of services for Teenage Cancer Trust, cancer referrals were down by as much as 75% in England, across all age groups, during this coronavirus pandemic.

Cancer can be effectively caught early and acted upon only if we ensure that the symptoms of cancer are fully understood and that people can see doctors. No one should have to suffer the physical or mental ordeal, or have their lives put at risk, from having their treatments delayed.

Covid-19 is certainly one of the greatest health emergencies we have had to fight, but at what cost? I, and a number of colleagues, have said in this House that we must ensure the treatment is not worse than the disease. Nothing brings this into sharper relief than the provision of cancer treatments.

In closing, I pay tribute to the heartbreaking story of young constituent of mine, Ellis Price, who lived with his mother and stepfather, Laura and Ashley Pearman. Last year, Ellis's mother noticed that he was falling over a lot. She took him to the doctor, but they raised no issues. Two days later, Ellis began to vomit violently and Laura took him back to the doctors. He was subsequently sent to Leeds General Infirmary, where it was discovered that Ellis had a brain tumour. Ellis underwent brain surgery, and the horrific ordeal of chemotherapy and radiotherapy. Sadly, on 20 July this year, Ellis's family were told that the treatment did not work. The tumour had spread to Ellis's spine, and was now terminal. Ellis died on 20 September. He was three years old. How many families have to suffer through the heartbreak of watching their child fight and, like Ellis, tragically lose to cancer?

I applaud the efforts of charities such as Teenage Cancer Trust and Cancer Research UK for raising the vital message of early recognition of symptoms. As we emerge from the current health emergency, more must be done to ensure that young people are educated on the symptoms of cancer, so that fewer families like Ellis's have to suffer.

10 am

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this very important debate.

I will use my time today to highlight the work of a charity in my constituency, based in Cupar, that is focused on childhood and teenage cancers, called Toby's Magical Journey. The "Toby" in Toby's Magical Journey is Toby Etheridge, who was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukaemia as a child, back in 2014. Together with his parents, Richie and Alison, he raised over £50,000 for charity during the two years of his treatment:

£50,000 that would help provide toys, games, gifts and experiences to children and young people who were being treated for cancer and their families, both at the Royal Hospital for Sick Children in Edinburgh—which is where 90% of child and teenage cancer sufferers are treated in Scotland—and to families across Fife.

After Toby's treatment was, thankfully, successfully completed in 2018, which was fantastic news, Toby, Richie and Alison decided to keep going with that amazing work, and set up Toby's Magical Journey as a result. I have seen first hand the support that Toby's Magical Journey provides, both to those being treated and to their siblings and parents. It is doing absolutely amazing work, helping people at what is an incredibly difficult time. When restrictions were eased earlier this year, I spent a morning sorting toys and craft gifts for Halloween, and saw the consideration and co-ordination that goes into the purchases it makes. I am looking forward to hopefully joining its team again in the run-up to Christmas.

One of the key issues that Alison, Richie and Toby have raised again and again—indeed, all Members so far have highlighted this—is the challenges that children and young people face in getting a diagnosis in the first place. This was not actually the case with Toby, but for many parents of children and young people with cancer, achieving diagnosis is often an arduous first step. The pandemic has created added difficulties: coronavirus is now a complicating factor, and that is why debates such as this are so important. Thirteen children and young people are diagnosed with cancer in the UK every single day, and of those 13, three will sadly die. That is a huge number of families every year, and it is therefore so important that we as a society do all we can to raise awareness of the symptoms of cancer, and to support those families who have children and young people being treated for cancer.

We have had Breast Cancer Awareness Month, and we have just finished Movember. These campaigns do a great job of raising awareness of the symptoms of breast cancer and testicular cancer. We need to better promote Childhood Cancer Awareness Month each September, in order to raise similar awareness of the symptoms of childhood cancer—symptoms that are not well known, which means that diagnosis can sometimes come too late. That means for many children, the chance of survival is greatly reduced, and as the hon. Member for Strangford has said, cancers in young adults and their symptoms are even less understood.

As I touched on earlier, this problem has definitely been exacerbated by coronavirus. In Scotland, general practitioners' surgeries are still not seeing patients, which means diagnosis over the phone. As we have heard, that is a real problem when it comes to the often obscure symptoms of childhood and teenage cancer. It is important that these young people can have a face-to-face session with a doctor. I hope the UK, Welsh and Scottish Governments will commit to this as an absolute priority, especially given the mass expansion of testing we are seeing and the prospect of future vaccinations. Thankfully, at the Royal Hospital for Sick Children in Edinburgh, those crucial treatments are still going ahead. Children are being covid tested, and one parent is allowed in—usually, that would be two. I pay tribute to the team there, who do such important, life-saving work.

I also pay tribute to Alison, Richie, Toby and their wider family, because childhood and young people cancer impacts the whole family, and to all at Toby's Magical Journey—volunteers, etc.—for the support they provide to children and families, but also for the way they have adapted the support they provide during the period of restrictions. Where they would be holding craft activities for family groups, they are now buying the same supplies and posting them to families, and doing sessions remotely. They are still sending gifts to children in the ward at the Royal Hospital, and I am pleased to say that Father Christmas will be doing socially distanced visits and meetings.

It is a very challenging time and as with many other charities, fundraising has been limited by covid. There are a number of factors, but one that I want to highlight is that people are using cash far less than they were at the beginning of 2020—I know that certainly I am. We need to think about how we can enable charities to continue to best collect donations in an increasingly cashless society.

Without child and teenage cancer charities such as Toby's Magical Journey, the experiences of families being treated for cancer would be far worse than it is. They provide vital support, but equally important is the voice that they provide to families and parents. Without parents like Alison and Richie, who have direct lived experience, child and teenage cancer services would be much the poorer.

Like the hon. Member for Strangford, I commend the work of the Teenage Cancer Trust. In Scotland, it contacts all children weekly by text, and young people can respond via coloured love heart emoji, depending on how they are currently feeling.

We should be aspiring for a system far better than the one we have: one in which parents not have to fight for their child or young person to receive a diagnosis or treatment. We can do much better than this. The work that people such as Toby, Alison and Richie are doing has hugely improved services and will continue to improve those services in the future. They are amazing, but they should not have to be amazing in some respects. They should not have to step in to advocate; we should be getting the system right in the first place. I am sure all Members here aspire to that.

Jim Shannon: On the issue of charitable giving, the Government have made it possible through gift aid that for every pound given, they will give an extra 25%. Does the hon. Lady agree that this could be raised better, to ensure charities receive that extra bit of money? Sometimes when giving money, if a person knows they will get more for it, it is a bit like investing money for the future as one pound is actually worth £1.25.

Wendy Chamberlain: I agree that is arguably one of the opportunities of a more cashless society. If people are making a payment, the gift aid opportunities are potentially easier to access than with putting money in a box.

I appreciate that healthcare is a devolved matter, but I am still looking forward to hearing the Minister's response because I am sure these challenges exist throughout the UK. Indeed, that is why the hon. Member for Strangford is the person who has secured this debate. We can also achieve much by pooling our healthcare expertise across

[Wendy Chamberlain]

the four nations. We should be making sure that in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England that we are following the best possible practice, which means raising awareness of symptoms, enabling swift diagnosis and ensuring that children, young people and their families are properly supported.

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): As the next person on the call list has withdrawn, I call David Linden.

10.8 am

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is, as always, a pleasure to see you in the chair, Sir Christopher. I very much miss serving on the Procedure Committee with you all those years ago, but it is a pleasure none the less to see you this morning.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing and opening the debate, and ob being back in his place after his period of self-isolation last week. He was very much missed last week in the debate that he had secured on the persecution of religious minorities. It is good to see him back in that seat—which I am sure he has probably got title deeds for now given that he is there so often.

This has been a very short but very enjoyable debate. The hon. Member for Strangford opened with a very passionate speech, as we would always expect from him, but in particular he spoke about that very poignant testimony from Alex. The hon. Member for Wakefield (Imran Ahmad Khan) spoke about young Daniel and that relationship that was struck by his father in hospital. I think hearing about three-year-old Ellis really moved us all. I cannot begin to imagine how difficult it must be for Ellis's family as they work through losing a loved one. The hon. Gentleman has spoken very eloquently on behalf of his constituents and they should be incredibly proud to have him in here to be raising those issues, as he sits alongside the Minister.

Finally, the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) talked about Toby's Magical Journey in Cupar. I, too, pay tribute to Richie, Alison and Toby for that remarkable figure of raising £50,000 pounds, and it was great to hear that Toby got the all-clear in 2018. She raised an important point about the impact that the transition to a cashless society will have on charities. I hope that is something that we can tease out in the debate in Westminster Hall on Thursday afternoon about transitioning to a cashless society, particularly in the light of the covid pandemic.

On that point, covid-19 has dominated so many aspects of our lives. Much of the discussion around public health shows that it is still so vital to look after other aspects of our health and wellbeing during this time. That very much includes checking for symptoms and signs of cancer.

With your forbearance, Sir Christopher, I want to pay tribute to and my hon. Friend the Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan), who has been a tireless campaigner on the subject of cancer and young people. She is not just one of my colleagues in this place and my constituency; she is one of my closest friends. I congratulate her on her election as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on children, teenagers and young adults with cancer. I also pay tribute to this young woman who has survived cancer twice. As has been well documented this year, she has also been through other health challenges. This House is stronger for having the experience of people like her. I look forward to her coming back and, arguably, making a much better speech than I could ever do. I hope to do this justice on her behalf.

I also want to pay tribute more broadly to the work of the APPG. It has done fantastic work in raising awareness of the issues affecting young people with cancer and their families. The 2018 report published by the APPG, "Listen Up! What Matters to Young Cancer Patients", looked into the cancer patient experience for children and young people across the UK. That report found that 64% of respondents did not think enough was being done to create a positive experience for children, teenagers and young adults with cancer. It also discovered that 82% of young people and parents responding to the survey did not think that Government listened enough to the experiences of young people with cancer and their families.

The report offered several recommendations for helping teenagers and young people understand the symptoms of cancer, as well as for those facing cancer treatment. Those include compulsory lessons in secondary school on spotting the signs of cancer; designated hospital parking for children and young people with cancer; an agreement by the Government to meet yearly with young cancer patients to discuss their experiences; and offering access to free fertility treatment to survivors of childhood cancer, who are not offered fertility preservation before receiving cancer treatment. That report highlights that not enough has been done to support young people and their families through a challenging diagnosis.

It is important that young people know the signs and symptoms of cancer, although they may differ from person to person. The common symptoms are lumps, unexplained tiredness, mole changes, pain and significant weight change. For more information about the different symptoms and where to seek help, I advise people to go the NHS website, the CLIC Sargent website and that of the Teenage Cancer Trust.

A lot of young people have expressed worry that they are wasting doctors' and nurses' time, particularly during the coronavirus pandemic. I get incredibly frustrated, as a constituency MP, when people say, "I don't want to bother the NHS or go to my GP, because they are really busy." One of our privileges in this place is to have the voice to get this message out to our constituents: "If you are experiencing any of those symptoms, please do not worry about bothering your GP or the health service, but go and get it checked out."

I want to reassure young people that if they have any of those symptoms or if they are worried about their health, they will be listened to and taken seriously. The NHS, in whatever part of the United Kingdom, is and always will be there for everyone. That is something we have certainly learned during the course of the pandemic. Despite the pandemic, the NHS continues actively to encourage people to contact their GP if they are worried about possible cancer symptoms. If the symptoms lead to a diagnosis, early diagnosis and treatment are really important and can improve the outcome for many young people.

I want to highlight the fantastic work of CLIC Sargent and the Teenage Cancer Trust, both of whom act jointly as the APPG's secretariat. Understandably, for many families, when a young person receives a cancer diagnosis, it can be a very scary and confusing time. From doctor's appointments to new treatments, the process can be overwhelming for young people. Those organisations offer advice to help young people and families to adjust to the cancer diagnosis and the treatment that follows. The Teenage Cancer Trust offers people advice on how to speak to doctors if they are feeling nervous, details of the different symptoms and case studies of teenagers and young people who have experienced treatment during the pandemic. CLIC Sargent is also a great resource, providing guidance for navigating clinical care, granting financial support and helping young people with the emotional impact of illness. Both organisations have new information around how to manage cancer during the covid-19 pandemic. Clearly, the public health crisis creates new challenges for patients, but there is still support available to help young people through this challenging time.

This year, the covid-19 pandemic has thrown unprecedented challenges at us all. From facing the virus itself to the huge financial insecurity that many people have experienced, to the restrictions and lockdowns taking us away from our loved ones, it has undoubtedly been a tough year for many of us. I say that after my grandfather was cremated yesterday. One of the hardest things that I have experienced during this pandemic was limiting the number of people at his funeral to 20. It has been incredibly, incredibly cruel from a public health point of view, and I think we would all agree that this has been such a difficult year for us.

This debate has highlighted that the teenagers and young people facing a cancer diagnosis and treatment during this time are facing even more challenges, but support is out there. Whether it be from the APPG, the NHS, CLIC Sargent or the Teenage Cancer Trust, there are people out there to offer information and guidance. It is vital that all young people check for the signs and symptoms of cancer. To reiterate, they are: lumps, unexplained tiredness, mole changes, pain and significant weight change. If a young person is experiencing these symptoms, I urge them to contact their GP. An early diagnosis will lead to the best outcome. Facing cancer as a young person can be incredibly scary and overwhelming and I pay tribute, above all, to all the young people undergoing treatment for cancer diagnoses. I thank their families, their carers and the NHS, who are working so hard to support them.

10.17 am

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this important debate. He works hard through the Backbench Business process to get important debates either on the Floor of the main Chamber or here in Westminster Hall. I think he has chosen very wisely in this one.

I know that all Members in the room have a personal commitment to this issue. My childhood experience of cancer was the death of my father just before my third birthday, and that stays with me and my family, 33 years on. I am here to speak up for my community, but also to fight on this issue so that across the country, there might be fewer families like mine. We are well served in that regard with the Minister, and her personal commitment to this issue is something that we all look to.

Similarly, when it comes to the Scottish National party, it always great to see the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) in his place. We always learn from his contributions, and also from those of his colleagues, such as the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford); with her enormous professional experience, she always adds to the debate. The hon. Gentleman mentioned his colleague and friend the hon Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan). I am sure she is watching, and I know the hon. Member for Glasgow East will pass our best wishes on to her. We can see that across this Chamber, there is a high level of commonality in our views about what must be done for young people. Between us, I am sure we can move forward on this important issue and make an impact.

I agree with so much of what the hon. Member for Strangford has said that throughout my speech, I will be reiterating the points that he made. Unlike him, I did not have a point to make on schooling, which is very important. Whatever challenges our children face in their lives—because of their socioeconomic background, their health, or whatever makes them different from their peers; everything makes a child different in some way—we must ensure that we are no less ambitious about their educational outcomes. We must meet their health needs in the short term, and then be ambitious about their futures so they can reach their potential. That is a cross-party theme; no one has ownership of it. It is important that we remain ambitious about the broader outcomes of children and young people who are suffering from cancer, so that—fingers crossed, and all that wonderful support willing—we can help them to resolve their health challenges and they can go on to live really full lives.

I refer to the poignant personal experiences described by the hon. Member for Wakefield (Imran Ahmad Khan). If he is still in touch with Daniel's family, I hope that they can take comfort from the fact that Daniel's story has been heard and his life recognised. The hon. Gentleman's moving contribution will stand as a testament to Daniel in *Hansard* for centuries, and I hope that the family get to see it. I agree with what the hon. Gentleman said about early diagnosis, and I will refer to that theme shortly.

On covid-19, the hon. Gentleman said that the cure must not be worse than the disease. I understand that, but if we do not put restrictions in place and we do not control the virus to the degree to which we are able, our NHS will not be able to do anything else because it will be overwhelmed. I do not think that treating cancer and treating covid are in tension, and I hope we do not lose sight of that in the debate that we will have later today.

The hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) made points about cashlessness. We are all looking at how covid will change British life and our own lives. I was thinking about cashlessness only this morning as I beeped on to the tube. I have had the same £10 note in my wallet for months, and it is hard to think when we will use cash again. I have to say that such change makes me a little anxious—that might just be something in me—especially when I think about my constituents. For me, beeping in is great and doing stuff on apps on my phone while watching the telly is brilliant,

[Alex Norris]

but for lots of people in my community, cashlessness would be their worst nightmare. We tend to think about it in those terms, but the hon. Lady talked about how we might embrace the opportunity to get better outcomes, and how we might all take into these new times the spirit of putting money into charities' collection boxes. Those points were well made. Importantly, I am sure that those whom she works with at Toby's Magical Journey will have seen that their contributions and their wonderful work have been recognised today. I will come back shortly to the point about getting an early diagnosis.

I have spent eight months as shadow public health Minister, and it has has been a non-stop procession of virtual calls. The fact that it has been eight months may remind you that it feels simultaneously as though this pandemic has been going on forever, and as though it only started yesterday. The sense of time and space is strange. Sometimes, the virtual meetings can blend in together—I think I can say that without that sounding rude—but one really stood out, and that was when I was lucky enough to meet the Teenage Cancer Trust youth advisory group. I heard from four incredible people who had all experienced cancer at a young age, and they shared with me their unique and personal experience of this horrific disease. What they said was eye-opening and quite hard to hear at times. It was so inspiring that those four young people, who have fought or are fighting cancer, have chosen to use their experiences to fight the greater fight for others like them. That has had a great effect on me and informed my work.

Those young people talked about the scale of the problem that we are dealing with. We know that every year, 2,200 15 to 24-year-olds will be diagnosed with cancer. Lymphoma will be the most common—about a third—the next most common will be carcinoma of the thyroid, cervix, ovary, bowel or breast, at a little bit less than that. Survival rates are improving. That is something we should recognise, and we should be pleased and optimistic about it. We know that 82% to 85% of teens or young adults diagnosed with cancer will now survive for at least five years, but that is still in the context of the fact that nearly once a day a young person will pass away from cancer. That is the level of seriousness of this debate. Cancer in young people is rare, thankfully, but it is the biggest killer by disease, and the 2,200 15 to 24-year-olds diagnosed each year face mammoth challenges. We in this place cannot make that go away, although we wish that we could, but we have a responsibility to make sure that the best services are in place to meet their health needs directly and to provide support. I know that we are all committed to that.

The hon. Member for Strangford talked about the wide variety of challenges our young people face; everyone goes through them, even if they do not have to deal with this disease. I am just about young enough to remember some of them, whether social, emotional or physical. The idea of combining them with the physical and mental burdens of dealing with cancer is quite unimaginable. As we know, the normal challenges faced by young people are not sidelined in that situation; dealing with cancer just adds to and compounds them.

The experience that the TCT youth advisory group shared with me highlighted one of the biggest issues that young people with cancer face, and that is diagnosis. As multiple hon. Members have said, that is something that those young people face before they even know they have cancer. Cancer is often not the first, second or even third suggestion for what their healthcare challenges might be, and we know that young people are the most likely age group to present three or more times before they are diagnosed. That is backed up by studies that show that rarity can lead to doctors being unfamiliar with some of the symptoms that are presenting. A compounding factor is that, as the hon. Member for Strangford said, this age group is the least likely to take to a doctor concerns about their bodies. That can often go on for more than a year. Although the challenges that we face are understandable, we should not accept them. Rarity is not an excuse for us to not be really focused on the issue, and to want to do something about it.

I know the Minister will want to do that, and I look forward to hearing her contribution. I hope she can address a couple of issues. I am particularly keen to understand what steps the Government can take differently to increase awareness of cancer, not just among young people, but also among healthcare professionals, doctors and the wider healthcare system. We know those people are doing their best, so what can we do better to make sure they have the right information and awareness to recognise it more quickly? The hon. Member for North East Fife mentioned Childhood Cancer Awareness Month, and I think we could all do more during that month.

I am keen to hear the response to the question asked by the hon. Member for Strangford about what can be done to get waiting time statistics broken down by age, and I will explain in a second why that is particularly personal. The current situation masks the true extend of the problem and restricts our ability to understand it.

That leads on to my point about the impact of the coronavirus. I have raised this at three of the last four Health questions. Dealing with the cancer bubble of delayed diagnosis and delayed care is critical to improving our health services and making sure we do not add to the terrible loss of life from covid a series of other lives lost to cancer. Young people are particularly at risk in that regard.

In the short term, I cannot even imagine how scary it must be to deal with cancer at a young age during this period of time, because all the support systems that would normally be there are more difficult to access, and they must be accessed virtually rather than person to person. That is really challenging. The long-term issue is around waiting times. In the first lockdown, referrals dropped dramatically, as people stayed home to protect themselves and others. That means that lots of undiagnosed cases of cancer are out there, many of which will be among young people, who were already less likely to seek medical attention or be diagnosed quickly. That is a potential added factor that may make outcomes for young people worse. As cancer services are restored, we really need a sense of what we are doing differently to deal with the bubble for young people in relation to those extra factors.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman is making some important points. There is a build-up of young people, children and young adults who have not had a diagnosis or the chance to get treatment because of covid-19. Does he think that in the Government's policy and

strategy decisions, resources must be set aside to address the long list of people who need diagnosis and treatment, and that resources must be in place for staffing as well?

Alex Norris: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. We will have to do something differently to catch up. When we talk about restoring cancer services, that does not mean restoring them to how they were in January. I know there will be a debate tomorrow morning on ways in which we can make those treatment pathways better. I think the wise thing to do is to focus on those groups on whom the impact is worse, and young people are one of those groups. Before I finish, I ask the Minister for her assessment of what the second lockdown has done to referrals and waiting times. When that was discussed at Health questions the week before last she was relatively optimistic about it, but I would be keen to know more. Particularly, we had a period between lockdowns where services will have been getting back to normal. Do the Government feel that we have learned any lessons from that about restoration of services, particularly for young people?

I want to conclude by saying, as have all Members who have taken part: if any young person, or indeed anyone at all, who is watching this is worried about possible symptoms, such as hacking cough, blood in the stool, or a lump or bump that they do not recognise—whatever it is—they should please not think that we are distracted by fighting the coronavirus and that they should therefore not present in the normal way to the health services. Do it—ideally this morning, or, if not, this afternoon or tomorrow morning. Whatever the earliest opportunity is, please do it, because the services will be there for you.

10.30 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jo Churchill): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I congratulate him on securing the debate and on the sensitive way in which he always approaches these subjects.

Someone once said to me, "You don't choose it. It chooses you." That is the challenge with cancer. People have very little control over when or if they have to make that journey. However, it is a matter of making sure that we have the services in place and can have early diagnosis, and that we never take our foot off the pedal in getting the right workforce and making the pathways simple. People are understandably discombobulated when they are told; it is a tsunami of emotions. I would gently say that in the case of someone's child, the wave is even higher. I could not imagine the pain of being told that.

On that point, I thank the hon. Member for Strangford for talking about Alex. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Imran Ahmad Khan) for his tribute to Daniel and to Ellis Price. I thank the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) for giving us a little hope and showing us that Toby's Magical Journey was a way those parents, through the most appalling circumstances, could turn their love of their child into something incredibly productive that is now helping parents who are going through the same thing.

As many hon. Members have said, the issue is a cross-party one. I was so pleased that the title of the debate was about raising awareness, because that is something that we can do in this place no matter what divides us about our other politics. We can raise awareness, and the issue of health is very much one that joins us, although the delivery of it is separate in the devolved nations that we belong to.

I thank those who have made contributions and want to add my good wishes to the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan). When I noticed that she had become the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on children, teenagers and young adults with cancer, I looked forward to perhaps being able to discuss things with her. As hon. Members have said, the ability to bring personal experience to this place—in the sphere of health, business or anything else—gives debates a power that is sometimes otherwise lacking. In these covid-tinged times, debates in this place have changed, but our ability to do things together—to raise awareness and make sure that people's voices are heard—is still very much in our control.

We have discussed the fact that cancer is no respecter of anyone. I have two young friends who have been through the challenge of teenage cancer—and it is challenging. One was just a teenager and the other was just exiting that period of life, which, as everyone has said, is one with an awful lot going on, emotionally and in a person's maturity. We have not talked about ensuring we get the transition right, but speaking to people from the Teenage Cancer Trust or young people who have had cancer, we know that ensuring we get them in the right place in the system is important, so that as they move into adulthood they are not on a ward with very young children and vice-versa.

We have talked about the challenges posed by covid-19. In phase one of the pandemic we stopped services, but as soon as we could push the recovery button, we did. I have focused, along with those leading the drive in the NHS—Cally Palmer and Peter Johnson—to ensure we do not do that again. It is important that people can access other treatments. As the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) said, if covid-19 overwhelms the system, all the other areas we so passionately debate will become secondary and access to those services will become more difficult. We should all be aware, however, of the ambition to be tough on this disease.

We will get into calmer waters. When we do, we need that long-term plan and personalised care interventions, including a holistic needs assessment, health and wellbeing information and support, and end-of-treatment summaries. We need to identify and address the more psychological, psycho-social and emotional needs from diagnosis onwards, and to inform GPs about what is happening to a patient and their ongoing needs. A patient's journey in hospital is often quite short, so those other medical professionals need help and assistance to access the information they need in their training.

As several hon. Members pointed out, childhood cancer is thankfully rare. That offers professional challenges in ensuring the diagnosis is as early as we would like. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield about the short window between Ellis's exhibiting symptoms and being in hospital. We often find that in young children; it feels as if the change happens in a week or so. That is a challenge for the profession, but one it is up

[Jo Churchill]

for. It is incumbent on me to outline to everyone that, thankfully, these cases are rare, but that makes it challenging for doctors when they are looking at a set of symptoms.

In the light of phase one, we have set up the cancer recovery taskforce, which includes children and young people's cancer charities, to ensure that their voice is heard. It is important that, as we are recovering, we ensure that individuals from across the cancer family have their voice heard, because no two journeys and no two individuals' needs are the same. That is a challenge. We are focusing on early diagnosis, workforce, treatment pathways, data and support. We are addressing system recovery, urgent referrals and screening, and ensuring the right communication is in place.

I know personally—like all of us—of the devastation this disease causes and the pain it brings to individuals and their families, but the impact on a young person is particularly heartbreaking. We know that cancer is rare among teenagers and young adults, who account for less than 1% of all diagnoses. Approximately 2,200 cancers are currently diagnosed for patients between 15 and 24. However, today's debate has provided an important opportunity to raise awareness and shine a light on young people's specific needs, experiences and recovery from cancer.

One of the positives of covid is that many more cancer treatments have become more patient-friendly and less impactful on the individual; that relates to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield about the treatment not being worse than the disease. Therefore, as treatments progress and with genomic testing coming along, it is important to make sure that we target the disease and not the healthy part of the body, so that we get the most positive outcomes for individuals that we can.

Jim Shannon: In my speech, I referred to clinical trials and the need for young people to be part of them. That will improve the data and the end results. Perhaps the Minister is about to come to that point and I apologise if she is, but has she any thoughts on how we can do that?

Jo Churchill: I thank the hon. Gentleman; if he will give me a second, I will come to that. Like him, I believe that research is the way to unlocking some the problems.

Awareness of teenage cancers in schools is important. Education from an early age on the causes and symptoms of cancer has been mentioned. I was pleased to see that this year's curriculum for religious, sex and health education means that children are being taught about some of the signs and symptoms of cancer. In particular, that includes skin cancer, the link between smoking and lung cancer and ensuring that people keep a healthy weight. All these things help young people to become more aware of themselves, their bodies and their health outcomes. I hope that will encourage someone to pick up the phone and take steps towards discussing their health if they are worried about it.

As the mum of four daughters and, like my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield, as the friend of parents who have been in this situation, raising awareness in a sensitive manner especially when the risks are low is something that we should all work on. Cancer is a frightening subject at any age and I pay tribute to the cancer charities that specifically deal with young people. As many Members have said, they do an amazing job not only to support people but to promote cancer awareness. For example, the charity HeadSmart helps to improve the understanding and awareness of the symptoms of brain cancer. The Teenage Cancer Trust, CLIC Sargent and Teenage and Young Adults with Cancer are also in this space, and the hon. Member for North East Fife pointed out that many local charities, such as Toby's Magical Journey, do good work right across the country.

There is another debate in the conversation about moving to a cashless society and understanding how charities will probably have to reframe their work. In my constituency only last month, a small team of three raised more than £400,000 in an online auction. Things will have to move in a different direction when traditional collections cannot take place. We saw that with the Royal British Legion's poppy collection, which was severely impacted. Like the hon. Member for Nottingham North, I am aware that if we are not careful, we will create a two-tier society because many people in all our constituencies still want to use cash. We could probably be smarter, but that is an issue for another day.

On the learning in school guidelines, we will keep an eye on how the research develops and feed that in. I will have further conversations with my colleagues at the Department for Education to understand how we look at the curriculum and what more we can do.

I turn to research. Only by understanding the data can we understand the treatment pathways and cohorts. I want to make a point about those carrying the BRCA gene, who tend to be much more at risk. A young friend with BRCA in their family recently had a double mastectomy. She wrote to me about the support that she had had from a charity and she mentioned raising awareness.

Understanding the data is really important. The National Institute for Health Research is leading a multi-stakeholder strategy with NHS England and NHS Improvement, cancer charities, teenage and young adult cancer patients and clinicians, focused on increasing the participation of teenage and young adult patients in research, as set out in the recommendations of the independent cancer taskforce in 2015 to improve outcomes. I regularly meet Cally Palmer. Our focus last week was on teenage cancers, because it is a challenging area where we know we have to do better. The collection of data is very important, as is the participation in clinical trials.

The NIHR clinical research network has funded specific teenage and young adult research and also nurse posts in its 15 local clinical networks, and has instituted measures to identify all teenage and young adult cancer patients participating in the NIHR portfolio research. It is also taking a lead role in an international initiative to remove artificial age barriers that prevent adolescents and young patients from accessing clinical trials.

There are some challenges around data protection and various other things that make the collection of age data a little problematic, but my offer to the hon. Member for Strangford is to take that away and further discuss with colleagues how we can do it. Although things often seem simple, they sometimes are not, and we have to consider the unintended consequences of collecting vast amounts of data. For example, who do we allow the data to be shared with? We can depersonalise

it for research purposes, but very often people want it personalised because they think that perhaps the school should know or whatever. All these things are very sensitive and need handling in the correct way.

The long-term plans states that we will

"actively support children and young people to take part in clinical trials, so that participation among children remains high"

and rises to the 50% that the hon. Gentleman mentioned by 2025. However, it is a challenge. Clinical trials need to be more representative across the board. We often find that they are particularly skewed towards males, but that is for another debate. Pharmacology and treatments act differently across genders and age boundaries, so making sure we have the right participants is important.

More effective consent processes for using data and tissue samples will contribute to improving survival outcomes. We will seek the views of patients aged under 16 to ensure that the NHS continues to offer the very best services for young people, which is where the cancer patient survey is most important. That will be used alongside other data to inform service design and transformation.

It is a given that we all want to do more, but making sure that the ambition for the future of cancer diagnosis and care is foremost is something that I am particularly focused on.

I am pleased that we have delivered on our commitment of September 2019 and that all boys aged 12 and 13 are being offered the vaccination against human papillomavirus-related diseases such as oral, throat and anal cancer. That builds on the success of the girls' programme, which has already reduced the prevalence of the main cancer-causing types of HPV, 16 and 18, by more than 80%. There is also prevention here, which is very important. Ultimately, that will reduce cervical cancers and other cancers as people go through their lives.

Our aim is to drive more personalised treatments for patients, but particularly children. From last year, we have targeted the use of whole genome sequencing, which will enable more comprehensive and precise diagnosis and access to personalised and less invasive treatment. Cancer treatment is often challenging, and the personal approach reduces medications and interventions that may be harmful to healthy parts of the body.

We also support increased access to clinical trials, making sure we have diverse participation across age, genders and ethnicities. Following from that commitment, we made available treatments targeting neurotrophic tyrosine receptor kinase gene fusion solid tumours earlier this year, following the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence appraisal. Further guidance that has been issued by NHS England and NHS Improvement prioritises the delivery of the long-term plan commitments that support the recovery of services.

The ambitions include improving survival rates and early diagnosis. In March, we had 17 live rapid diagnostic centres. However, since October we now have 45, and I hope the fact that, even during the pandemic, the cancer workforce have stood up a further—I will do my maths very quickly—28 rapid diagnostic centres shows that commitment. Continuing the accelerated roll-out of places where people can be swiftly diagnosed is vital to getting on top of this disease.

I know hon. Members have raised concerns about the impacts on services through the second wave. As I said at the start, we must protect NHS capacity for non-covid services such as cancer. We expect cancer services to be maintained, with the redeployment of staff or blanket decisions to postpone services made only as a last resort and only at the behest of the clinicians involved in the treatment of others in their local area.

I have been meeting regularly with the national cancer director, Cally Palmer, and this week NHS England issued its latest guidance on maintaining cancer recovery throughout the second wave. It is important to continue to advise children and young people and their parents, as several hon. Members have done, to contact their GPs if they are worried about any sign of cancer. It is far better to pick up the phone and ask and to have their worries allayed than to think that maybe they could have rung before.

Referrals in September were running at 102% against referrals last year, but we do have a backlog to make up, and we still have some challenges in some of the pathways, which I know the workforce are addressing as swiftly as they can. We saw 199,801 urgent referrals, which, as I say, was 102% of the normal rate year on year; in April it was at 40%. That gives hon. Members some idea of the differential that we have to drive forward. We intend to ensure that we get education right for professionals and that we maintain a patient-centred approach.

I would like to conclude by wishing all those young people the best for their treatment and a fervent hope that they get to ring the bell. At the end of treatment, in most wards, there is a bell that young people get to toll, which marks out that they have finished what is a pretty gruelling episode of their life. I would like to hear that bell ring out for every family. While I know in reality that that is not possible, with good attention to research, by ensuring that we collect the data appropriately, and with all of us focused on raising awareness, I hope we will hear those bells ring out much more regularly.

10.55 am

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for the wee reminder of that TV programme. We have seen the adverts for Great Ormond Street Hospital—and other hospitals as well—where, when the child has finished their treatment, they ring the bell. That is an incredible finale. It is a wee salient reminder to us all that we have a wonderful NHS—a wonderful health service—and that it can make changes in the lives of young people.

I thank all hon. Members for their contributions and personal stories. Everyone has a personal story and everyone has shared their story with us today. It reminds us all of the heartache that others go through, even though we, personally, are fortunate not to have travelled that road. I believe that we, as elected representatives, have a responsibility and a duty to deliver on behalf of those people. I thank each and every Member for sharing their wonderful stories—what a reminder for us all.

I also thank Members for raising awareness, which we will continue to do. The Minister and every hon. Member is right to continue to do that. The hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) is absolutely on the ball on the issue of charities and how we can help them.

[Jim Shannon]

I welcome the Minister's commitment to the review of clinical tests. I understand the reasons in relation to personal data. I also welcome her other comment on being able to pick up the phone and get reassurance—it is so important that people do that.

I look forward to working together. I have said often, and I think we all agree, that the House always shines better when we agree on the subject matter. This morning, we have all agreed on the matter and are all very pleased at the Minister's response. I am not just saying that; I really think that her response was excellent.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of raising awareness of signs and symptoms of cancer in teenagers and young adults.

10.57 am

Sitting suspended.

Hare Coursing

11 am

Gordon Henderson (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of hare coursing.

I am very fortunate to represent a constituency that has both urban and rural communities. In Sittingbourne and Sheppey, we are privileged to have access to lots of green space where we can enjoy our wonderful rural natural environment. We are also privileged to be surrounded by many acres of good quality agricultural land, where our local farmers produce fruit, vegetables and cereals that are as good as any found in any other part of the garden of England.

I am conscious that those privileges come with the great responsibility of ensuring that we properly protect our land, its wild animals and the habitats that they call home. That protection extends to our population of native hares, which is why I applied for this debate. I want to highlight the damage caused by the barbaric practice of hare coursing. That, for those who do not know, is defined as the sport of hunting hares using sight rather than scent.

I beg to differ. Hare coursing is as far removed from sport as you can possibly get. It is nothing more or less than the cruel use of live hares to train dogs to hunt them down and kill them just to make money. Increasingly, the so-called training events are organised on a competitive basis and used as an opportunity for hare coursing supporters to take part in illegal betting.

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): I very much welcome my hon. Friend's bringing to the House this important subject, which is of extreme concern to my constituents in Huntingdon and to people in wider Cambridgeshire. On the point that he raises, is he aware that those events are being streamed not just locally but nationally for gambling purposes, and that therefore this problem goes beyond all our constituencies and is a national problem that must be dealt with as such by the Government?

Gordon Henderson: I fully agree with my hon. Friend. The betting generates thousands of pounds for the greedy and unscrupulous organisers of the events, who truly have the blood of hares on their hands.

Hare coursing is having an adverse effect on our native hare population, which in turn has an effect on biodiversity. That is why hares are included in the UK biodiversity action plan.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Sir Christopher, I sought the hon. Gentleman's permission to intervene. I suspect that he is coming to the game laws. Section 4 of the Game Laws (Amendment) Act 1960 makes provision for "seizure and forfeiture", but those powers do not extend to the aggravated offence in section 32 of the Game Act 1831. Therefore, does the hon. Gentleman agree with me that the older game law should be amended to create consistent seizure and forfeiture powers for all poaching offences, including those involving dogs and vehicles, and that that would act as a deterrent, assist the police and enable the courts to impose penalties that reflect the seriousness of the offence?

Gordon Henderson: My hon. Friend will be delighted to learn that I am about to come to that in my speech; he has pre-empted me somewhat.

In addition to the adverse effect of hare coursing on the hare population, there is a negative impact on the lives of farmers and landowners, who have to put up with all sorts of illegal acts, such as vandalism of property, theft, intimidation and the destruction of crops, with the consequential loss of income. Of course, those who take part in illegal hare coursing are also guilty of other crimes, such as road traffic offences—including the driving of unlicensed and uninsured vehicles—drug taking, the possession of firearms, and the illegal betting that I mentioned earlier.

I would like to tell the experience of one of my local farmers, a friend of mine. In October, just before harvest time, my friend discovered that vehicles had been driven on to one of his fields, leaving wheel marks and scuffs on the turns. He said that although the marks left by the wheels largely faded away, the scuff marks did not, and he lost crops at harvest, which meant a loss of income and earnings. It was not the first time that that had happened. My friend is not alone: many of my local farmers experience similar problems.

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): Other hon. Members have made the point that the old game laws need to be reformed to increase fines and the money that the courts can reclaim from those criminals. My hon. Friend mentions the impact of the damage on farmers. Farmers also have to invest quite significantly in defences against hare coursing, such as digging ditches and putting locks and bars on gates. Does he agree that it should be possible for councils or the police to recompense farmers for some of the costs that they incur in defending against illegal hare coursing if, as I hope he will mention, the courts can reclaim far more money from the criminals?

Gordon Henderson: My hon. Friend must have been reading my speech, because my very next paragraph explains that my farmer friend decided to dig ditches around his fields and install locked metal gates wherever he could. Even those sensible actions did not deter the criminals because, as my hon. Friend explained, they now come prepared with battery-powered disc cutters to cut off the padlocks or cut through the metal barriers to get to the fields and continue their hare coursing. How on earth are our hard-working farmers meant to earn a living in the face of these determined thugs who break down barriers to trespass on their land?

The behaviour described by that farmer is not that of opportunists, but well planned acts by people who are motivated by nothing more than greed and money. That is clear from the equipment they carry with them. They are prepared for breaking and entering, invading other people's land, and causing long-term damage while they are there. That behaviour needs to be stamped out, but the available sentencing powers are insufficient to be a deterrent.

As Members of Parliament, we have a duty to our constituents and hard-working business owners to ensure that their firms are protected. Farmers are businesspeople. These callous acts of criminal damage would not be tolerated against any other business. Why should it be any different for farmers and landowners?

This year has proved challenging for lots of rural businesses, including farms, which have not escaped the pandemic and the resulting economic impact. Farms have also faced the worrying possibility of a no-deal Brexit. They do not need the additional threat posed by criminal gangs, who are increasingly targeting rural communities.

What can be done about hare coursing? The Crown Prosecution Service website admits that

> "Hare coursing can cause significant disturbance in the countryside",

as well as causing a lot of concern to people living in the wider rural community where the activity takes place. Those words are small comfort to farmers who believe that the "significant disturbance" is being ignored, as are the laws that have been put in place to protect them. As hon. Members have pointed out, three pieces of legislation cover the problems that farmers face.

First, section 30 of the Game Act 1831 includes two separate offences for trespassing during the day in search of game. Fines depend on the number of people involved: up to £1,000, or up to £2,500 if a group contains five or more people. Secondly, section 1 of the Night Poaching Act 1828 sets out two separate offences: the first makes it illegal to go on someone else's land unlawfully at night to take or destroy game, while the second makes it illegal to enter land unlawfully

> "with any gun, net, engine, or other instrument, for the purpose of taking or destroying game".

Someone caught committing those offences could be liable for a fine of up to £1,000. Finally, the Hunting Act 2004 outlaws activities associated with organised hunts.

Hare coursing, however, was an offence of its own long before the Hunting Act 2004 came into force. I share the view of the Nation Farmers Union and see no reason why the Hunting Act 2004 should have to be used to sort out this problem. Hare coursing is a much wider issue that should be treated in isolation, not in conjunction with the Act. Legal guidance from the Crown Prosecution Service says that more effective tools for prosecuting are either the Game Act 1831 or Night Poaching Act 1828, both of which I mentioned earlier. We have enough legislation to tackle hare coursing, but the problem is how the maximum penalties in those Acts are implemented: the truth is, not very well.

Rural crime, including hare coursing, has escalated in Kent in recent years and policing methods have had to adapt and change with the growing threat this now presents to rural communities. Officers in the Kent police rural taskforce do excellent work in tracking down the perpetrators of rural crime and building cases against them. However, they do not always receive the support they deserve because they are not always backed up by the rest of the justice system. For instance, the Crown Prosecution Service decides whether a crime is worth prosecuting and the courts decide what punishment should be meted out once prosecution goes ahead and somebody is found guilty.

Farmers and other people living in rural areas in my constituency want to see a toughening of the penalties imposed on those found guilty of rural crimes, as my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger) said, because the current penalties are simply not enough to discourage hare coursing criminals. The NFU released

[Gordon Henderson]

some research a couple of months ago that looked at the level of fines imposed on those found guilty of hare coursing. Between 2014 and 2018, the average fine under the Game Act 1831 was £227, when the maximum fine for offences under the Act is £1,000, or £2,500 if five or more offenders are involved. It cannot be right that the average fine imposed by the courts was just £227, and I am sure you would agree, Sir Christopher, that such a penalty is derisory.

As I mentioned, a lot of money is made from hare coursing. Sometimes hundreds of thousands of pounds is involved; surely nobody believes that such a small fine is going to put perpetrators off. Frankly, it is tantamount to a slap on the wrist. How can such risible fines be justified to farmers who, due to biosecurity concerns, may have to scrap tens of thousands of pounds worth of crops damaged by hare coursing? It is just adding insult to injury.

When the victims are brave enough to confront the trespassers—as some of the farmers in my constituency have in the past—they are met with threats of violence and untold amounts of verbal abuse, and it has to stop. We are a civilised nation that relies on its farmers, and we have to protect them from these thugs. They need Government support, which they are currently not getting.

In the absence of that support, the NFU has this year worked with other farming business and rural wildlife organisations to create an alliance that aims to produce an action plan to end illegal hare coursing. This coalition believes that some simple changes to the Game Act 1831, together with better guidance for the judiciary when passing fines, would go some way to mitigate the worry, the disruption and the intimidation experienced. For instance, it has been suggested that the most powerful way to get through to the people committing those crimes is to seize their dogs, as my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford mentioned earlier. Currently, police forces are deterred from taking such action because the cost of keeping animals in kennels cannot be recovered from the offenders in the same way as it would be if dogs were seized for their own protection under the Animal Welfare Act 2006.

I understand that police fully support an amendment to the Game Act 1813 and Night Poaching Act 1828 along those lines. These are not controversial proposals, and, unusually, there is widespread agreement and an acknowledgement that something needs to be done as soon as possible. Why, then, have campaign groups been met with reluctance and hesitation by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to take any of this forward?

These are issues that have been raised for many years and, sadly, these types of attacks on farming communities are nothing new. I have raised this subject before in a Westminster Hall debate. On that occasion, I read this letter from a constituent:

"Dear Sir,

The Isle of Sheppey has a population of over 36,000. During the summer this number is more than doubled. We have read in the local newspaper about yet another reorganisation, but the fact remains that police presence on the Island is inadequate.

On Saturday 2nd November…we had cause to phone 999 as there were four men with dogs coursing hares on our farm. Only one patrol was available. No criticism is intended or implied of the individual officer, but he had no realistic chance of apprehending four experienced criminals who were playing 'cat and mouse'. With assistance from my husband they were caught, but yet again have got away with it.

This incident was not an isolated one. There have been six incidents here since September…We have witnessed them all and found numerous gates open on all six occasions. This is done deliberately so that the dogs have an unimpeded chase after the hares… we had twenty four incidents of this kind, all of which were reported. Some incidents were attended by the police and some were not. Of the twenty four incidents, arrests were made on only two occasions. In the first case the culprits received £250 fines and we are still waiting for the £15 victim cost.

In the second case the CPS abandoned the case only informing us the day before the hearing. This cost us money as we had already made arrangements for someone to care for our animals during our absence. The CPS claim there was insufficient evidence for the charge that was brought. Our view is that the case was dropped to save money. (It has been reported that the CPS drop 500 cases a week)…We are now in despair and have reached the stage where we may as well let these people have their fun without interruption."—[*Official Report*, 9 April 2014; Vol. 579, c. 99WH.]

That Westminster Hall debate took place on Wednesday 9 April 2014. If my calculation is correct, that is six years and eight months ago, give or take a few days. Sadly, the woman who wrote that letter is no longer with us. She died a couple of years ago. The scandal of hare coursing, which filled her with such despair, remains.

I do not want to have to come back for a Westminster Hall debate on hare coursing in another six years, so I urge the Government to listen to my farming community, make the necessary changes to the law and, at the same time, vastly increase the maximum fines for what is a truly barbaric crime. The time for such action is long overdue.

11.17 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): It is a pleasure to be here with you this morning, Sir Christopher. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Gordon Henderson). I think he said he started raising this issue six and a half years ago, which was just before I arrived here. I did look up whether he had raised it before. It is an issue that has grown and expanded and I applaud him for returning today to raise it again.

Given what a short time we have for the debate, a surprising number of colleagues have come along to intervene, which demonstrates the strength of feeling, including my hon. Friends the Members for Devizes (Danny Kruger) and for Huntingdon (Mr Djanogly) and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). Quite a number of hon. Friends and hon. Members have also written to me on this subject.

Hare coursing is a vile and despicable activity. When I was a news reporter years ago back at HTV in Bristol, when I first started as a young girl, badger baiting was rife. Hare coursing is not unlike that terrible activity, which certain people thought was an acceptable thing to take part in. It is vile and it is ghastly.

I point out, unequivocally, that hare coursing is illegal. The brown hare—the Lepus europaeus—is a naturalised species listed as a conservation priority in the UK's biodiversity action plan. It is a much-loved creature and its core habitat is arable farmland, with some improved grassland. As I was discussing with a colleague earlier, people tend to like pursuing this activity in the open fields, where there is lots of space to get around.

The hare is not endangered, but we are a nation of animal lovers, are we not? I, for one, think this is a dreadful activity.

Mr Djanogly: Is the Minister aware that for some farmers, one of the answers to this is to go out—quite legally—and shoot all the hares on their land, to stop people coming in to course them?

Rebecca Pow: I am actually fairly horrified by that. I hope that is hearsay; I hope it is not true. I was raised and brought up on a farm, and to see a hare out in its natural habitat is a great thing. Certainly, my brother has hares on his farm, and I do not think they have had any incidents of this, but that is not anything that one wants to hear.

This is not just about the harm to the creature, of course. This activity causes real harm to rural communities, which is why we are determined to continue our efforts to prevent it, and my Department is working very closely with the Home Office on this. We have heard some very compelling accounts this morning from my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey about the serious harm in his constituency; harm to farming families and to others in the community. We have also heard stories of property theft—the joint is cased while the activity is happening, and often the stealing happens later—dangerous driving, and even arson, assaults and intimidation. Only recently in Cambridgeshire, for example, a man engaged in hare coursing was convicted of dangerous driving and criminal damage and jailed for two months, having driven at speeds of nearly 100 mph across the farmer's field to try to evade the police. It is also fairly horrifying to hear that these events are now being streamed, which is further expanding the audience.

However, I am sure that my hon. Friend would agree that a lot of progress has been made, certainly over these past six and a half years. I commend the work of the police, because they are doing a great deal in many areas to deter hare coursing. The Government support the police's efforts to tackle this through the National Police Chiefs' Council rural and wildlife crime policing strategy—that is a big mouthful, but it is definitely there to help, and it aims to target the problem through better preventive action, improved intelligence and enforcement activity. We are now seeing a much more co-ordinated approach across many police forces.

I particularly pay tribute to Chief Inspector Phil Vickers of Lincolnshire Police, who is the national lead for colleagues and other forces on something called Operation Galileo. I do not know whether my hon. Friend has heard of that, but it focuses on the prevention of hare coursing, and it now joins together 21 police forces, sharing information and intelligence from across the whole of the UK to target offenders. It is supported by other, more sophisticated prosecution capabilities, bringing them to justice; it has also invested in drones, which I believe will be very helpful in something like this, and other technologies so that they can track and monitor hare coursers, as well as gather evidence, which of course is one of the key things. It is bearing fruit: for example, the last two seasons have seen the smallest number of incidents on record in Lincolnshire. What they have learned there is something that others can also learn from and share.

Poaching, which includes hare coursing, is one of the UK's six wildlife crime priorities. Those priorities are set by the UK Wildlife Crime Tasking and Co-ordination Group and the National Wildlife Crime Unit, which I am very pleased is working well and remains in existence; it has just had its next year's funding confirmed by DEFRA. It is a joint operation between the Home Office and DEFRA; lots of other interested bodies take part in it, and it also gets funding from the Scottish Government, the Northern Ireland Executive and the National Police Chiefs' Council. They all put money into the pot, and hare coursing is definitely on their radar.

I must just say that this Government are committed to providing more police officers, and recruitment is well under way, with 4,000 already in place and more on their way. That should also make a difference, particularly in our rural areas.

Danny Kruger: Does the Minister share my concern that the increase in police numbers, while extremely welcome, is still being done according to the old formula, which privileges urban police forces over rural ones? We have to get more police officers into our rural constabularies.

Rebecca Pow: It is about priorities, obviously. I urge my hon. Friend to engage with his local police force. They understand rural crime and its big knock-on effects—it is not a one-off thing; it can spread to all these other things. Hare coursing has knock-on effects, from stealing to arson to other issues. That is definitely being highlighted in rural areas.

I have highlighted lots of good work, but I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey that there is more to do. My Department recently convened a roundtable meeting with a range of rural partners, the police and the Home Office to consider what further action could be taken to strengthen the response to hare coursing. Those discussions will continue. The Minister for Crime and Policing and I really value the insights that those meetings provide us with, and the input that we have had from other hon. Members who have written to us. For example, south Cambridgeshire MPs recently sent a letter about the issues in their area.

I am aware of suggestions that the police should be given greater powers to seize the dogs used in hare coursing, and that the courts could possibly confiscate the dogs permanently on conviction. At the moment, they can seize the dogs, and they look after them in kennels—often at vast expense—but when the person is prosecuted or fined, the dogs get handed back, which could allow for further illegal activities. That has definitely been raised, and we are exploring it further. Similarly, it is up to the courts to decide how to hand out fines and how much to fine, and valid points have been raised that some of the fines are not high enough. Sentencing guidance could potentially help with that, especially for these rural areas.

Gordon Henderson: I accept that the courts interpret the level of penalties. However, it is for us to decide what the maximum penalty should be. If we increase the maximum penalty from £1,000 to £100,000, for argument's sake, the courts would have to take that into account and would be less likely to fine somebody £100.

[Gordon Henderson]

Rebecca Pow: I hear what my hon. Friend says, and I get the message about the exasperation. Those messages are being heard. Going forward, consideration will be given to some of the other options that have been raised.

As I said, we will keep up those regular discussions with the Home Office and the hare coursing coalition, which my hon. Friend referenced and which brings a wide range of bodies to the table, including the Country Land and Business Association, the NFU, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the British Association for Shooting and Conservation, the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust, the Kennel Club and others. A diverse group of people have been brought together by this frankly horrific activity.

I thank all those who have taken part today, but particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey for keeping his eye on the ball, albeit after waiting for six and a half years. He was right to open up this discussion, and I thank him for it. I am fully aware of the impact of hare coursing on our farmers, who we so value in our countryside and who work so hard to make their operations viable.

Question put and agreed to.

11.28 am

Sitting suspended.

North Staffordshire Potteries Towns: Levelling Up

[Peter Dowd *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that there have been some changes to normal practice to support the new covid system and to ensure that social distancing can be respected. Members should sanitise their microphones before they use them, using the cleaning materials provided, which should be disposed of as they leave the room. Members are also asked to respect the one-way system; please exit by the door on the left.

Members should speak only from the horseshoe. Members can speak only if they are on the call lists. That applies even if debates are under-subscribed. Members cannot join the debate if they are not on the call list. I remind Members that they must arrive for the start of debates in Westminster Hall. Members are not expected to remain for the wind-ups.

2.31 pm

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Government's levelling-up agenda and post covid-19 economic recovery in North Staffordshire Potteries towns.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. Covid-19 has hit the world hard, particularly north Staffordshire. I want to thank all the health and care workers, who have done, and continue to do, so much to care for those who have fallen victim to covid, often at considerable personal risk. They have our enduring gratitude—our key worker heroes in the fight against covid-19. I also thank those who have been working throughout the pandemic, keeping vital services going. They are heroes, too. Teachers, lecturers and classroom assistants are keeping schools open, ensuring our children continue to be supported and to receive the education they need.

Coronavirus has impacted our economy, particularly sectors such as hospitality, as well as many supply chains, such as tableware manufacturers in Stoke-on-Trent. We must look to the future and hope in confidence that we can defeat this virus and return to a path of economic growth, greater opportunity and increased prosperity. Stoke-on-Trent is on the up and we must keep it on the up, redoubling the efforts that were long overdue even before covid struck. With the incredible scientific progress on vaccines and more rapid testing, we live with hope that the post-covid-19 era is just months away.

We know from the end of the first lockdown that Stoke-on-Trent was one of the quickest to return to normal footfall and sale levels, second only to Derby in the midlands. We want to see that again, as soon as it is safe to do so. We have seen one of the highest covid rates in November. Thankfully, it has now already started to reduce significantly, and is down by 21%. Hopefully, by continuing these efforts, we will be able to leave tier 3 very soon; we hope at the first review on 16 December.

Stoke-on-Trent is a city made up of six historic pottery towns, each of which has its own high street to revive and support in the months and years ahead.

Similarly, across the whole of north Staffordshire, from the moorlands to Newcastle, myriad communities in towns and villages form a total catchment of nearly half a million people. I deliberately called today's debate on the towns, because they all need levelling up as a whole area. I recognise that might sound challenging.

In July 2013, the BBC News website ran an article by Matt Lee, entitled, "Is Stoke-on-Trent's 'six towns mentality' holding it back?". My answer to that question, then and now, is firmly, "No", but it is always good to remind the Government that Stoke-on-Trent is a city of six pottery towns. Although it is, of course, vital to have a strong city centre—something that the city centre business improvement district and other key partners are working hard to deliver—it is essential that the character of our historic pottery towns, of which people are rightly proud, does not disappear.

The six towns mentality that the BBC reported on with such curiosity in 2013 is not something we are ashamed of. Indeed, it partly resulted in the Labour administration that the BBC reported on at the time being swept from power, because of its blatant attempts to downgrade our towns to mere suburbs. All our towns across north Staffordshire play a key role in building a stronger post-covid recovery. I am particularly focused today on the two pottery towns in my constituency, Longton and Fenton, but I will start with cross-city issues that impact the whole of the Potteries.

While recovering from covid is important, unfortunately many of the challenges we face predate it. We are one of the most regionally imbalanced countries, and I am delighted that the Government have recognised the necessity of levelling up our country with the announcement last week of the £4 billion levelling-up fund. I assure the Minister that there is no greater case for investment than locally in Stoke-on-Trent.

Across Stoke-on-Trent, seven wards have been identified as left behind by the all-party group for "left behind" neighbourhoods and Local Trust, three of them in my constituency. Stoke-on-Trent now has the 12th highest proportion of deprived neighbourhoods on multiple measures out of 317 council districts in England, up one place since 2015. We are not even level on a regional basis, let alone nationally. Health comparators put Stoke-on-Trent as worst in the region in terms of life expectancy and a number of other health indicators. Gross value added per head in Stoke-on-Trent trails behind the regional and national averages considerably. Earnings, likewise, are lower by some margin. Gross weekly pay for full-time workers in the city averages £501.20 whereas it is £550.80 across the west midlands and £587 nationally. As a recent levelling-up report by Onward showed, gross disposable household income declined between 1997 and 2018, but less so than in most other deprived areas because of gains in productivity.

One factor influencing wages is that levels of academic qualification in Stoke-on-Trent are significantly worse than in other parts of the country. It is vital that more is done to improve access and to push up aspirations. Only 22.5% of people in Stoke-on-Trent have a qualification of NVQ level 4 or above, lagging considerably behind the national average of 40.3%. This is despite an excellent higher education offer in north Staffordshire, including at the University of Keele and Staffordshire University. These are challenges we must overcome if we are to recover stronger and to truly level up.

While there are challenges, there is much potential for improvement. Prior to the pandemic, we had seen some of the strongest economic growth of any city in the UK, with high new business start-up rates and retention rates. We also have a strong focus on growth sectors where we have great potential to succeed owing to our natural strengths, including advanced manufacturing and creative and digital industries.

For advanced manufacturing, it is vital that the bid for wave 2 of the Strength in Places fund for midlands advanced ceramics is successful. It would develop an advanced ceramics centre in north Staffordshire to create the high-skilled jobs that we need. The bid is led by Lucideon in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) and the Midlands Industrial Ceramics Group, a consortium that includes companies such as Mantec Technical Ceramics in Longton in my constituency. A commitment from UK Research and Innovation will help catalyse private investment and level up opportunities.

In digital, we have huge potential to strengthen and attract new-tech firms. We already have the largest number of students in gaming and computer sciences in the country at Staffordshire University. Massive investment in fibre broadband that is being plugged directly into homes and businesses as we speak will see Stoke-on-Trent become the first gigabit-connected city in the country. This is an exciting opportunity to attract digital and tech companies to locate in our area, bringing skilled and well-paid jobs.

The key factor will be continuing to improve educational standards, and we need to support all our schools to continue to improve. I strongly believe that a proposed wave 14 free school for my constituency is part of this improvement and needs to be granted the support of the Government. The Florence MacWilliams Academy, which is named after a local mathematician and coding pioneer of worldwide renown, will boost local ambition and help more local pupils embark on academic and technical careers.

For some across north Staffordshire, the barrier is literally an issue in being able to get to college or work. The public transport network is woefully inadequate. There is heavy dependence locally on the car, which accounts for about 80% of journeys. This car dependency to access work, skills and leisure opportunities comes despite 30% of the city's population having no access at all to a private vehicle. For those with no car and few public transport options, dreams and ambitions are severely limited. Indeed, the A500/A50, which we call locally the D road, is a classic piece of urban splintering for those without a car. The strategic network operates at around 110% of capacity and resembles a car park, with poor reliability at peak times.

Sadly, this congestion is mirrored on a local road network that has lacked real investment for decades, with three parts of the network now under ministerial direction due to air quality breaches. We face the unthinkable reality of having to implement harsh measures to improve air quality, which threatens jobs and livelihoods, when the focus should instead be on improving public transport.

Congestion is the main reason identified by local bus operators for the decline in our public transport. Even before covid, over the past decade bus journeys declined locally by a third. The combination of road congestion,

[Jack Brereton]

lack of connectivity and the poor reliability of local buses inhibits businesses and housing investment, a compounded barrier to employment for people who already struggle to access employment opportunities and housing. The lack of cross-city transport options, even where there are bus routes, means that passengers are required to use multiple services, with unreliable journey times and no guarantee of connection. In addition, despite growth in rail nationally, this modal shift has been held back locally by a lack of infrastructure, not least the closure of much of the local rail network under Beeching, including the Stoke to Leek line.

North Staffordshire has not seen a single station reopen since the Beeching axe. In part, this has been due to the methodology for prioritising infrastructure spend. While large cities have seen stations reopen since Beeching, in north Staffordshire local services have got worse. As part of the west coast upgrade in 2005, Etruria was removed altogether, and services to Wedgwood and Barlaston were suspended indefinitely, never to return. Local services have been sacrificed for the benefit of slightly improved fast inter-city services. Such was the legacy of a city in decline under the Blair and Brown Governments.

What is needed is a transport revolution: a step change in our relationship with the car, and a properly integrated public transport system. The Government must commit to our bid for the Transforming Cities fund. We also need investment from the Restoring Your Railway programme, and the delivery of levelling-up funding that enhances public transport. The Transforming Cities fund will be the start of a journey towards more effective local public transport systems across north Staffordshire, where we see bus prioritisation and better integration of bus and rail. Feeder services into a multi-modal hub at Stoke station will ensure the greatest return on the Government's investment in bringing High Speed 2 to Stoke-on-Trent. Already, one of our plans for Meir station has been given Government backing as part of the Restoring Your Railway programme. We want to see the Stoke to Leek line advancing, too, as well as the restoration of services at Wedgwood and a study into the options for light rail and restoring Etruria.

It is vital to ensure that all communities are connected to economic opportunities, and now is the time to invest in transport infrastructure, level up connectivity and access opportunities. Improved local public transport would support wider development in the area, unlocking unviable sites for housing and economic regeneration. We are keen to embrace the Ministry's housing targets, and a new round of the Housing Infrastructure fund would help us mitigate substantial brownfield sites that are currently uneconomic due to remediation costs. To be effective, any community infrastructure levy must reflect the varied nature of housing markets across the country.

I very much thank the Minister, and welcome the support being given by the Government to areas such as Stoke-on-Trent through last week's announcement of a £100 million brownfield fund. Funding is essential to remediate sites and get development off the ground, particularly where values are challenging. We need to realise the growth and the economic successes witnessed through the hugely successful ceramic valley enterprise zone. That success has seen brownfield sites transformed, supporting businesses and jobs, and this needs to be echoed on our high streets and in our town centres.

However, there is a huge potential stumbling block to levelling up in many Government funding programmes, which is the 25% local contribution requirement, as well as the lack of resources at a council level to make schemes shovel-ready. My heart drops whenever I see local contribution levels I know we do not have the money for or will struggle to meet. Frequently, the city council resources relied upon to do this work will be limited to one or two officers. The council tax base is the second lowest in the country after Hull, and many resources were reprioritised over a decade ago to meet the costs of social care.

We cannot level ourselves up, and I ask the Government to please look again at the implications of hefty local contribution levels and the lack of revenue support for left-behind areas. The most disadvantaged areas need a new formula where support is provided to make schemes shovel-ready and the expected local contribution is reduced or waived, otherwise there will be no point in bidding for levelling-up programmes in the first place. The National Audit Office has already made this point in relation to certain bus funds that required a substantial local contribution and therefore did not reach the communities that needed them most.

In Stoke-on-Trent South, Fenton is undergoing several improvements, with new housing and a better public realm in the historic Albert Square. The city council has invested £28.7 million in Fenton, bringing forward derelict brownfield sites for new housing and restoring the iconic square.

I am delighted that the Cultural Recovery fund was able to offer support to Fenton town hall. Significant work is being done to bring the important historic building back into use following a huge local campaign by the community. It now houses a whole range of businesses and organisations that are helping to bring life back into Fenton. Restoke, a local performing arts organisation, is bidding for Arts Council funding to bring the historic town hall ballroom back into use for the creative enjoyment of the whole community and to bring together people from all backgrounds. It is essential that we secure this funding.

I am keen to see the station reopen at Fenton Manor, with the reopening of the Stoke to Leek line. Fenton is sometimes called the forgotten town, not least because Arnold Bennett excluded it from his "Stories from the Five Towns". I will continue to ensure that Fenton gets the attention it deserves—lobbying to get Fenton Manor station reopened is part of that.

In Longton, which has the biggest high street in my constituency and the second largest in Stoke-on-Trent, significant support is needed to get the town thriving again. Longton has a proud history as a centre of fine china within the Potteries, and there has been a recent renaissance in ceramic design and manufacture locally, especially the recent successful rejuvenation of Duchess China 1888.

However, Longton is also an area of multiple deprivation and the conservation area is rated very bad on the at-risk register. Many of the industries the town once relied on have closed or moved, and competition from out-of-town and online has hit the high street very

hard. Even pre-covid, Longton suffered from very high vacancy levels—double the national average—and many properties are in a very poor state of repair. Thankfully, Longton town hall was saved by the community from the threat of demolition in the mid-1980s and has recently seen investment by the city council and now has a sustainable future as a local centre and hireable space. The upper floor will also receive funding through the Getting Building fund to be converted into a shared workspace.

Longton as a whole has not yet received the level of attention needed to restore it to its former glory, yet its potential for growth as an authentic and liveable town is obvious, even after decades of decline. In 2017, we secured a pioneering heritage action zone from Historic England to cover Longton and the bottle ovens of the Potteries. While this has started to make progress, the original HAZ seems to have been slightly eclipsed by the later high street HAZs across the country in getting the job of town centre restoration done.

The Longton HAZ needs a new boost of investment and the city council has secured Partnership Schemes in Conservation Areas funding totalling £900,000, in partnership with Historic England and property owners. This is a positive step, but greater ambition for securing investment must deliver a much greater scale of change. It was a huge disappointment when we missed out previously on high street and town funding. We want to attract new residential and economic uses, whether digital and tech firms or creative studios. Attracting these new uses can provide a strong future for Longton and help better sustain the retail offer.

There is huge potential to convert empty high street space, with converted historic buildings providing quirky spaces in which to live and work, but incentives are needed for these conversions to happen when costs to owners often outweigh the return. Similarly, brownfield town centre and former factory sites would be great spaces for new commercial and residential use, but we need support to address the deliverability challenges.

Like in Fenton, where public realm work has been delivered, we need to invest in making the physical environment in Longton more appealing, which would boost footfall and better stitch the town together. Gladstone is the finest single site of bottle ovens that survives in the UK and is the greatest driver of tourism footfall in Longton. Covid has hit museums very hard indeed, and it is vital that significant community assets should be supported and that our bid for covid emergency funding should succeed. It is by preserving our unique industrial heritage that we will continue to attract today's leading international ceramicists—practitioners who could base themselves anywhere in the world—to Stoke-on-Trent as the authentic world capital of ceramics.

I hope we will see a wider deal to level up Longton—a deal that will help to integrate the town centre better, with investment in public spaces and the bringing back into use of empty historic buildings. Together, that will encourage footfall, helping to get our fantastic market traders and retailers back on track. Improvements to Longton could be part of a wider towns deal, through the levelling-up fund, that invests in improvements for a number of our towns across north Staffordshire that need support. Properly restored, Longton will attract new residents, visitors, shoppers and businesses, as the finest preserved example of a Potteries town, with the authentic skyline of chimneys and bottle ovens.

We continue to face more short-term sacrifices to control the pandemic, and work to get Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire out of tier 3. We should be under no illusions about the huge hits to our economy and mental health. I firmly believe in delivering funding now for projects that will give the Potteries a brighter future and will mean that we can recover to be stronger than before. That involves some tough asks of Government—that they deliver on their promise to level up opportunities across the entire country. The Government must invest in the areas that need it most, and not just cement the position of those that already have. There is so much optimism for the future, and after decades in which we have been ignored last week's spending statement has renewed our hope that Stoke-on-Trent's time has finally come.

2.52 pm

Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I think it is the first time that you have chaired a sitting I have taken part in, so it is an honour. It is also an honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton), who secured this important debate.

As can be seen from the level of attendance by Members representing north Staffordshire constituencies, we care about it desperately. We are also extremely pleased that, despite the billing on the call list, the Minister is also a Staffordshire MP. It is wonderful to see him in his place, and it will be a lot easier for us to explain many of the things we will say about north Staffordshire. Despite not being a north Staffordshire MP he will, I know, appreciate as a Staffordshire MP the many unique aspects of the life of north Staffordshire.

I am not being too much of a fraud, but I do not represent a pottery town if they are truly defined as Arnold Bennett defined them, as the six towns of Stoke-on-Trent. However, I represent the town that he called Axe, which is Leek in Staffordshire Moorlands, and the town of Biddulph and numerous villages. It was our villages and towns that helped the Potteries to succeed. The flint mill in Cheddleton, the village where I was born, was where the flint was ground before being taken on the canal. The canals were created by James Brindley, who lived in the Staffordshire moorlands and created the Rudyard lake that Rudyard Kipling was named after, and which fed the canals. Those canals enabled the flint to be taken from the Staffordshire moorlands to Stoke-on-Trent where, in Burslem, Fenton, Longton, Hanley, Stoke and Tunstall—I got all six—it was used in making the most fantastic pottery.

I had the great pleasure and privilege—using my birthday present from March, which I could do only at October half term because of the various restrictions of the past few months—of visiting World of Wedgwood and enjoying afternoon tea. I saw the fantastic museum setting out the Potteries and how they came about. Anyone visiting the museum will see just what a powerhouse north Staffordshire was. It was at the forefront of developments in science, technology and manufacturing that transformed the way pottery is manufactured around the world; and it still manufactures the very best pottery today.

This debate is about the levelling-up and post-covid-19 economic agendas. We cannot start that debate without recognising that we have to get through covid first. I

[Karen Bradley]

have great fears about the economy that will be left for us to recover post covid. I received more messages last weekend from businesses in my constituency that are concerned about the impact of the measures that are currently being debated in the main Chamber. I have incredible sympathy for those businesses, with what they are going through.

It is a shame that we, as Members of Parliament, are presented with the Hobson's choice of voting for restrictions. In many cases, they are necessary to save lives—to be clear, north Staffordshire does need to be in tier 3 at the moment, as our hospital desperately needs to get on a sustainable footing before we can move out of those restrictions—but it is a shame that the only option presented to us by the Government is to vote for the measures, on which we will not get another say for a couple of months. I have great reservations about some of the things included in those measures.

I think about the businesses that have been in touch with me, particularly hospitality businesses. Hospitality is such an important part of the community. In fact, there was a time when Leek, which I referred to earlier as Axe, had more pubs per head of population than anywhere else locally, and possibly across the country—it had a phenomenal number of pubs. They are all drinkers' pubs—the wet pubs we talk about—not food pubs. They will be grateful for what the Prime Minister said about support, but £1,000 will simply not get those businesses through if they cannot reopen and start serving. To be clear, what they want is to trade, serve their customers and make money. They do not want Government handouts; they want to be able to work and trade. I urge the Government to think really carefully about how we can help support those businesses, because there is no point in us having these discussions if we have no economy to come back to.

On Saturday, I visited Heaton House Farm, which I have mentioned in other debates. As a dedicated wedding venue, it is suffering incredibly. It could not benefit from the eat out to help out scheme, and it cannot benefit from VAT cuts because it has no turnover on which to have one. I went because the farm is selling Christmas trees—Mick Heath, who runs Heaton House Farm, is very resourceful and a great seller of Christmas trees. He provides trees for the whole of Leek and the town centre. He pointed out to me that he had to spend his own money to buy those Christmas trees in November, but when he put the order in, he did not know whether he would actually be allowed to sell them.

Business needs certainty and to know what is coming. My right hon. Friend the Minister, who is not only a savvy and experienced Minister, but experienced in the world of business, knows that business needs certainty and, for example, more than 24 hours' notice to be able to connect the beer to the pumps to sell it the following day. They need time and certainty. Will the Government think carefully about that?

To go back to levelling up and post-covid, one of the most critical things for north Staffordshire is transport, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South touched on. The Staffordshire Moorlands constituency—I have to be clear, because it is not the same as Staffordshire Moorlands District Council—is one of the very few in England in which there is no mainline railway station and no dual carriageway. We are home, however, to one of the UK's biggest tourist attractions in Alton Towers. We desperately need alternative forms of transport.

Just pointing out that there is no railway station and no dual carriageway indicates the kind of roads that we are dealing with. In fact, we are saddened to be home to some of the most dangerous roads in the country in terms of fatalities and accidents, which feature regularly in the top 10—particularly the road from Leek to Buxton, the A53. We desperately need some alternative transport.

We have made a bid to the Restoring Your Railway fund and the Minister will know from his ministerial experience how important such matters are. I beg him to work with us to help convince the Department for Transport that it is a worthwhile investment to reopen the train line between Stoke-on-Trent and Leek. It would make an incredible difference to the lives of so many people. It would enable us to get visitors in—we rely on tourism. It would enable us to get visitors into the moorlands in a much more environmentally friendly way. It would make journey times better for all, including for those who have to commute.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South talked about the dependency on cars in the area. We do not have buses. We simply have to rely on our own cars to get about, and it can take an hour and a half to two hours at times to go just 12 miles between Leek and Stoke-on-Trent, so we really need alternatives. We need money in buses. We need to make sure our villages are connected, and the train line would make an incredible difference.

My hon. Friend touched on skills. As the Minister will know, Staffordshire has been historically underfunded in education. It is one of the worst-funded authorities in the country, sitting at, I think, the third worst at the moment in per head funding—I stand to be corrected on that. Staffordshire desperately needs more money per pupil to be able to compete and to invest in skills. I know I am preaching to the converted in the Minister on that topic, but we need to see investment in skills, and in the right skills, so that we can make sure that our young people are working in the industries of the future.

Broadband has already been discussed. All connectivity is an issue in a constituency where a third of its geographical area sits within a national park: the Peak District national park. We are always going to have problems with making sure that there is connectivity, but proper investment is needed.

I had a really interesting conversation last week with Hollinsclough Church of England Academy, one of the schools in one of the most isolated villages in my constituency. It is trying to find some way of getting fibre broadband to the premises in Hollinsclough, but the current estimated cost is £63,000, which is simply unaffordable for the school. Without proper fibre broadband to the premises, the school cannot serve its community. It serves a wide community, because it offers flexi-learning and deals with children who find it harder to be in more mainstream education. It is a very nurturing, loving village school that enables children through flexi-learning, in a way that works for them.

I also feel passionately that another way we could help north Staffordshire level up is through culture. Stoke-on-Trent bid to be the 2021 city of culture—the bid was won by Coventry, and well done to Coventry. I

was the Culture Secretary at the time and had to recuse myself from all the decisions, because everyone could see quite clearly that if Stoke-on-Trent won, my constituency would do very well out of it.

The bid that came in was excellent. Stoke-on-Trent worked with neighbouring authorities to come up with a really innovative, diverse and unusual bid. It showed the value that culture can have. We are talking about the Potteries—the cultural history in the area is absolutely incredible. Support could be given through a cultural investment fund, where local cultural institutions could bid for support to enable them to invest in capital or skills—something that would enable them to really work.

Culture is not a "nice to have"—it is essential. If we want businesses to invest in an area, they are only going to put their business, their headquarters or their factory there if their employees have something to do when they leave work. Those employees want cultural activities when they leave work, and sporting activities—they want to be able to participate in those things that make us happy.

We have the wonderful New Vic in Newcastle-under-Lyme. This will be the first Christmas for a long time that I will not be able to go to the Christmas play at the New Vic—we all know and understand why. It is a fantastic institution. It benefited from some funding from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and was grateful for that. We need to see that and other cultural institutions thrive.

I have talked about tourism, which is such an important part of the constituency, and I have a plea from Alton Towers, my biggest employer, which is suffering, having lost an incredible amount of the season—particularly the school trips, which are so important for any theme park. They fill the park during the week outside the school holidays, which is traditionally when we all visit such things with our children. The school trips are during the week when everyone else is at work, and the theme parks have lost that. The VAT cut was very helpful, but they need that to be extended. We cannot just assume that we will go back next year, hope there is a vaccine in place and hope we can have some normality and that Alton Towers will just thrive. It needs support and the VAT cut made an incredible difference.

I have two final points. The first is working with others. We are very proud of our local authority structures in Staffordshire, our two-tier system in the county and our unitary in Stoke-on-Trent, and we do not want that to change in any way. We want to ensure that decisions are taken at the right local level, but that does not mean that we cannot all work together. That does not mean just working together in Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent, but working across those counties that share very similar economic challenges to us—the A50 corridor.

The A50, for anyone who is unfamiliar with it—some of us use it more often than others—runs from East Midlands airport across Derbyshire and Staffordshire and into the A500, joining the M6 at either Stoke-on-Trent or Keele. It is an incredibly important road, because along that route we start with the East Midlands airport junction with the M1 and we come to things such as Rolls-Royce, Bombardier and Toyota. We then come to Burton, with its historic brewing industry. Then we have JCB, Stoke-on-Trent with the historic Potteries, and areas such as mine that are more rural. Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire and Staffordshire all have that rural aspect to them, as well as a unitary authority in the middle of the county.

We have fantastic universities, from Keele and Staffordshire to Derby and on to Nottingham and even Leicester; we could extend it beyond that. I know there is work being done to see what more can be done to help that Mercian stretch of the country to work together and get some real benefits—not just road, but rail, which I know my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South will care about.

However, my final point is that in order to do that, we are going to need help with how the Treasury calculates value for money. I know the Chancellor has said he is looking at the Treasury formula; can my right hon. Friend the Minister put any pressure on him to ensure that for counties such as Staffordshire—in particular north Staffordshire, although I know he will want to put pressure on for the Tamworth area of Staffordshire as well—we can have a funding formula that works, so that investment can be made?

On the face of it, looking at the cost-benefit analysis compared with what might be the same spend in a city—perhaps even in Liverpool, Mr Dowd—it may well appear that spending that money in my constituency is not such good value for money, but it will make such an incredible difference to the people who live in Staffordshire Moorlands and north Staffordshire. If the Government are genuine about levelling up, they must ensure that areas such as north Staffordshire really see the benefit of their fantastic policies.

3.8 pm

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) on securing this important and timely debate. It is great to see such a united and robust representation from my constituency neighbours, friends and colleagues here from the Potteries towns of Stoke-on-Trent and north Staffordshire.

Stoke-on-Trent has great ambitions; the city is so much more than its history, yet it is undeniable that the potters of Stoke-on-Trent are our city's beating heart and have been for more than 250 years. The pottery industry in Stoke-on-Trent accounts for a significant element of our city's economic output. Our renowned ceramics can be found all over the world. However, none of that would be possible without the 8,700 employees working in the ceramics industry in Stoke-on-Trent.

We all know that, sadly, during the pandemic, hospitality, tourism and non-essential retail have been really badly hit. In Stoke-on-Trent, we have a heavy reliance on manufacturing and technical industries, so we entered the pandemic in a weaker position than parts of the UK with industries and services that are more adaptable to the new requirements of working from home and social distancing. With many manufacturers in the Potteries using heavy machinery as part of line production, it is a tall order to require them to operate from home, or with significantly reduced staff in order to abide by social distancing. Because of the nature of our workforce, we have had a higher redundancy rate generally in the west midlands—about 16% between July and September—compared with the national average of 11.3%.

[Jo Gideon]

The stark reality of the situation facing us is that between March and October this year, the number of people claiming unemployment-related benefits in Stoke-on-Trent Central increased by more than 2,000 to roughly 5,000 people, from 4.7% to 8.5% of residents of working age. In my maiden speech in the House of Commons, I committed to a renewed focus on the economy and jobs in Stoke-on-Trent Central. That means investing time, resources and finances in skills—not just building on and expanding from our industrial heritage but looking to the jobs of the future, which will require new skills. Only 25% of adults in Stoke-on-Trent have qualifications above A-level, compared with a national average of 40.3%, which is why I welcome the Government's investment in further education colleges and the commitment of £2.5 billion for a national skills fund to improve adult skills. However, more must be done to equip our workforce to face the challenges of a competitive and evolving economy.

The city-wide roll-out of full fibre across Stoke-on-Trent will have enormous advantages for our workforce. There are clear economic benefits associated with network build, such as the positioning of our city to gain early mover advantage in achieving 5G coverage. I will leave it to my colleagues to speak about Silicon Stoke and 5G in more detail. Further Government investment, such as the £250,000 received by Stoke on Trent College for its creative industries project, and a further £120,000 for a digital and construction skills project, are hugely welcome in our city. These projects alone will directly create 2,440 jobs and safeguard another 110, with 440 construction jobs also set to be created. To sustain this economic advantage, I will work with the Government and the city council to support a full fibre academy, in partnership with Stoke on Trent College and our secondary schools. It will train young people wishing to get involved in the field, giving them installation skills and hands-on field experience.

As our focus turns to creating higher-skilled, higher-paid employment in higher-value industries, post-industrial communities such as Stoke-on-Trent will need more support from the Government to help nurture and develop our large community of advanced manufacturing businesses, digital specialists, agritech companies and more. That is why I have lobbied relentlessly for the project backed by a major consortium of manufacturers, universities and research institutes to establish an advanced ceramics campus in Stoke-on-Trent, to encourage the fusion of education, research and public sector innovation with leading private sector partners such as Lucideon.

I am proud of our local businesses and how they have stepped up during recent difficult months. Businesses such as the Slamwich Club in Hanley, which recently won an award in the Staffordshire chamber of commerce business awards, embody the truly inspiring resilience of our city. Having been required to close the doors of the sandwich shop in March, Nicole and Steph, owners of the Slamwich Club, not only pivoted their entire offer to focus on food delivery services but decided to do so while leading the charge on the green revolution in our city, opting to use e-bikes to deliver their products across Stoke. It is precisely that innovative and entrepreneurial spirit that makes Stoke-on-Trent Central the perfect place to invest in and to be considered for allocations of funding for green technologies, such as green vehicle charging infrastructure, e-bike rental schemes and carbon capture technologies.

I welcome the Government's commitment to providing £275 million of support for the installation of home and workplace charge points for electric vehicles, and £582 million for the plug-in car grant, both of which will help make it more affordable to own and drive an electric vehicle. Those are welcome investments in new technologies, which will ultimately consign our current air pollution problems to the past. However, it would not be an exaggeration to say, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley) has done, that Stoke-on-Trent needs a transport revolution that will focus on improving our air quality while also supporting the city's continued economic growth. To do that, we absolutely have to secure the £29 million investment from the Transforming Cities fund.

Bus use in Stoke-on-Trent has fallen by a third in 10 years. To reverse the decline, it is vital that we receive the tens of millions of pounds of investment promised in the Red Book to transform the city's relationship with non-car transport. We cannot allow the absence of reliable public transport to damage our local economy and risk jobs. With my fellow Stoke-on-Trent colleagues, I have repeatedly made that point to the Government. Delivering the Transforming Cities fund deal is not only extremely important for providing better and more sustainable public transport in Stoke-on-Trent, but it is integral to supporting our local economy in the recovery from covid-19. I understand that a final decision will come shortly, so we all look forward to what we hope will be good news.

In Stoke-on-Trent, the legacy of our industrial heritage provides significant scope to create employment through the redevelopment of our city's abundant brownfield sites. I want to see the heart of Hanley and Stoke reinvigorated with quality homes built with good-sized gardens, electric charging points, great connectivity and space for homeworking, as well as commercial developments that reflect the changing way we will operate our businesses post-covid. However, as the Minister is aware, because of the city's status outside the West Midlands Combined Authority, we did not qualify for the £400 million of brownfield funding in July. That was hugely disappointing, because we have shown that with remediation support, such sites are an excellent opportunity for thousands of new homes, including Help to Buy homes. There is also massive potential for commercial investment on legacy land, as we have seen at both Festival Park, which is a former steelworks, and the ceramic valley enterprise zone. Our city is in the best position for brownfield regeneration with green space preservation. I hope the Minister will take into consideration Stoke-on-Trent's unique situation during the bid process for the next round of funding.

Another challenge that we faced in Stoke-on-Trent was the definition of eligibility in applying for the Towns fund deal. We are a city of six towns, each of which has its own challenges, and yet it will be as one city that we grow and prosper. That requires significant work to redesign elements of the city, taking a holistic view. I ask the Minister to allow for a Stoke deal featuring three of our towns—Hanley, Longton and Tunstall—and to recognise the importance of investment in our towns in the future vision of levelling up our city as a whole.

Levelling up was always going to be a difficult challenge, and the unfortunate reality is that the pandemic has made it even harder. It has shone a light on what is so important by highlighting the inequalities that we all seek to tackle. Our city has a big heart and great people who care about each other and the future of our young people. In conclusion, I want to put in a plea for investment in our people—in the charity, voluntary and community sector and public services—who work with those who are furthest away from the workplace to ensure that no one is left behind in our mission to level up.

3.18 pm

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. As my colleagues have done, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) on securing this important debate. I begin, as he did, by praising everybody across north Staffordshire and in my constituency for their role in helping us to combat this pandemic. I praise the health and care workers, the leadership in the various hospitals and all the key workers helping us get through this period. I particularly want to praise the scientists for the scientific progress that we have made. The news about the vaccine is fantastic.

The Prime Minister visited a vaccine manufacturer in Wrexham yesterday. I am afraid I beat him to it, because I visited Cobra Biologics at Keele science park on 30 April, where I saw the first of the batch of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine being generated before it had even got into the bioreactor—a really small reactor with some of the first of that viral vector vaccine.

That example from Keele shows what we can do to help levelling up. The science and innovation park there and the investment that we are putting into Keele University are making a huge difference to my constituency. That is not spread across all of my constituency yet, and I will talk about that as I move through this speech, but I would just like to praise the work that all the scientists have done in getting us to the point at which we really have some hope. I think the fact that we now have hope should inform our votes later today in the House about how we combat the next few months. I think that it makes the case for continuing with restrictions, but I will speak more about that later.

I also echo what my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley) said about the need for more support. I will make that case to my right hon. Friend the Minister here and I know that he will speak to his Treasury colleagues and others about that.

The market town of Newcastle-under-Lyme, as I said in my maiden speech, is also full of mining villages, and it is only because of those mining villages and the quality of the coal that they produced that these pottery towns are where they are at all. That is why they sprang up—because of the quality of the coal that was mined from the North Staffordshire coalfield. We do not actually have potteries ourselves; we do not have pottery kilns in Newcastle-under-Lyme, but we very much feel part of the wider north Staffordshire area.

We have a strong sense of identity and community across the area. I work incredibly well with all four of my colleagues in this debate. I will also point out that there is a friendly rivalry between Newcastle-under-Lyme and Stoke-on-Trent in particular, and there is a desire to maintain our own identities in the way that my right hon. Friend described. We want to work together. We have worked together. We are working together on covid; the directors of public health speak together about that. But we are very firm about our own identities.

We are the loyal and ancient borough of Newcastle-under-Lyme. We have been sending people to this place for far longer than Stoke-on-Trent has done, and long may that continue—but I do not wish to spend the debate winding up my colleagues, because my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) is speaking next and I fear that he may get his own back.

If I may, I will reminisce for a minute, with apologies to the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah). A year ago, we were out on the doorsteps in the election campaign, and I do not know about my colleagues in the other seats that we gained, but it was around that time that people were firmly coming over to us. In the early part of the election campaign, people were waiting and seeing, but as we moved to the last couple of weeks, people were making up their minds, and there were reasons why people voted for us in north Staffordshire last year. There were obviously the reasons around Brexit and the reasons around the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), but the third thing that I heard on the doorstep a lot was that people really bought into what we were saying about the need to revitalise market towns, mining villages and places that had felt left behind.

Newcastle is incredibly proud of its market, and people would repeatedly say, "The town is not what it was." Covid has exacerbated the retail issues in the town centre, and that is why I am so grateful that we were included in the Future High Streets programme. There are certain key elements of the bid that is currently with the Minister or with the Ministry. I am really keen that we hear back soon, because the last I heard was that it would be the last week of November and my watch informs me that today is 1 December. We need to find out how we are getting on with that Future High Streets bid, but the redevelopment of the long-vacant Ryecroft site in the centre of town will be a huge step forward for us. At the moment, that is being used as a testing centre, which is actually a particularly innovative use of the space, but it has otherwise been for too long an eyesore in the centre of Newcastle-under-Lyme. It will be used for a mix of employment and residential uses. There will be a new multi-storey car park, so we can knock down the Midway one, which is not fit for purpose. There will be more public space. There will be more direct pedestrian and cycle connections to residential areas north of the town centre. We will have linked plazas, we will have public spaces and there will be ways to complement the improving offer from the street market by creating a community events space in the heart of the town that speaks to the cultural aspect.

Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council has worked hard to develop the bid. It is ambitious and forward thinking, and it will help us to create the vibrant town centre that my constituents are desperate to see. This funding bid is a real opportunity for Newcastle. I really hope that we secure it, and that we hear very soon from the Ministry about where that is going.

[Aaron Bell]

I also look forward to the submission of our town deal bid. I should draw Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, as I am a member of the town deal board for Newcastle-under-Lyme. We have another meeting on Thursday. That is another reason why we would like to know about the Future High Streets submission—so that we can build on that in our town deal submission. I have been contributing to the development of that bid. It has been very ably chaired by Trevor McMillan, vice-chancellor of Keele University. It will also bring real change to the town centre—areas that were not covered by the Future High Streets bid. There will be a new skills and enterprise centre in Lancaster Buildings, the iconic buildings in the centre, where Ironmarket meets High Street in Newcastle. For too long they have been empty because of, frankly, overly high business rates. The reason I could not put my office—my shop—there, where I wanted to, was because the business rates were too high, so I had to go a little bit further afield where the small business rate relief applied in full. We need to look at small business rate relief when we look at high streets.

There is going to be a repurposing of the former Zanzibar nightclub, which pre-dates my time in nightclubs, I am afraid. It is going to be used for mixed use and social housing. There is going to be more connectivity with a town centre wi-fi and there is also going to be a focus on disadvantaged former mining villages, especially Knutton. We need to put the heart back into Knutton, and Chesterton, and that is what we are proposing to do. That is what levelling up from the public sector is about.

This is not just about the public sector, however. I am struck by how hard the town centre has been hit by covid. First, in the retail element, covid has probably accelerated things that were already there. In recent months, we have lost lots of shops and restaurants, including Laura Ashley, Dorothy Perkins, Edinburgh Woollen Mill and Pizza Hut. Some of them were probably in a bad way before covid, and that has been accelerated. We need to look at repurposing, and I know the Ministry is making it easier to turn former shops into residential or commercial use.

This is also about the hospitality sector. In Newcastle-under-Lyme we have purple flag status, which recognises the quality of our early evening and night-time economy: the pubs, clubs, restaurants and cafés. We have many entrepreneurs investing in our town and bringing jobs to our area, and they are struggling. Levelling up is not just a public sector activity. I was on a call yesterday with Mr Leon Burton, the chief executive of the Staffordshire and Cheshire Leisure Group. He runs a place called the Milehouse, which is up in Cross Heath—again, an area that really needs levelling up. His business invested £700,000 in making the Milehouse a desirable location, in a spot that used not to be so desirable. He feels that we have not gone far enough in our support for hospitality, and I have to say that I agree. I welcome what the Prime Minister said today about giving wet pubs £1,000. The Milehouse is getting £2,000 a month in grants, but it is spending £1,620 on national insurance contributions and pension contributions, so Mr Burton is getting a net £380 a month to cover everything, including his rent. He makes the reasonable point that he is not clear how much longer he can survive like that. He has £100,000 of VAT debt, and I assume—I make this plea now—that we will roll over the deferrals on that. However, we need to find a way to make sure that people from the private sector who have invested and are helping to level up are not left behind.

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend will appreciate that the VAT cut on hospitality does not apply to alcohol, so businesses that are able to open are struggling. If they are open, their fixed costs are the same whether single households or multiple households are allowed to visit, and when they are closed, they have fixed costs that they have to cover. We need to make sure they are there when we get through this, and they need support.

Aaron Bell: As usual, my right hon. Friend is right. We need to find a proportionate measure. There are lots and lots of hard choices; the pandemic has meant choosing between one bad option and another throughout. I do not envy the Prime Minister and the Health Secretary the choices they have had to make, and I will be supporting the Government today. I will not get to give my speech in the main Chamber, because I am No. 105 on the call list and I think they have reached about No. 30, so I will make that point now.

I recognise that the Chancellor of the Exchequer also has hard choices to make. It is not as simple as saying that we should give everybody a turnover and make them whole, because that is taxpayers' money, too, and we need to be realistic about how we use it. However, the support has to be proportionate to the damage that those places are suffering.

I will briefly talk about a couple of other areas in which we could level up. I want to hear more from the Minister, when he sums up, about what the new £4 billion levelling-up fund will do. I welcome that, and I would like it to be extended to local areas. I do not know what "local areas" means in the guidance. Does it go down as low as parish or town councils? I spoke to Audley Rotary Club last week. Audley is a mining village and it is not included in the Future High Streets fund because it is not part of the town centre, but the mining villages further out, such as Audley and Bignall End, need levelling up, too.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) mentioned the potential 5G pilot, and I want to put a word in for that. All 12 Staffordshire MPs wrote to the Chancellor, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport about that. Most of all, I echo the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South about public transport. Newcastle-under-Lyme is one of the largest towns in the country without a railway station of its own. We would like a lot more to be done about buses, as we said in this place at the start of this year in my first ever Westminster Hall debate.

In the longer term, we would love to put a metro proposition together, and we would like some help with that from either the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government or the Department for Transport. Too many local authorities that need levelling up do not have the experience necessary to put the bids together, because they have not had this funding for years. We

need help so that we can put the best-quality bids together and get the levelling up that our communities deserve.

I want to briefly mention culture. Newcastle-under-Lyme is proud of its culture and history. We are the birthplace of Philip Astley, the founder of the modern circus, and hopefully our town deal will do some work around that. The New Vic, which my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central was kind enough to mention, had a fantastic restoration during covid, which turned out to be exceptionally well timed. I went along to the relaunch event, "Ghostlight", which was socially distanced and very good, although I have so much sympathy for the theatre, which cannot put on its Christmas performance this year.

I had better wrap up, otherwise I will be talking my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North out of this debate altogether. Thank you very much, Mr Dowd, for letting me make these points about the importance of levelling up for north Staffordshire and all our communities.

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): Before I call Jonathan Gullis, may I ask you to finish by 3.38 pm if possible, to give the Minister, the Opposition spokesperson and Mr Brereton an opportunity to respond briefly?

3.31 pm

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): I will do my best to rattle through my long list of asks, although I am sure I will be repeating many of the same messages of my colleagues across north Staffordshire.

I represent the fine towns of Burslem and Tunstall, two of the original six in the Potteries, but ultimately I am unique in this debate, because my constituency also covers the town of Kidsgrove and the village of Talke, which are in the Staffordshire county area. I therefore understand the challenges and the difficulties, but also the nuances between the county of Staffordshire and the city of Stoke-on-Trent. I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) for securing this important debate.

It is quite clear that the Government have to take risks, and that means looking at areas such as Stoke-on-Trent. Yes, we will not get the massive returns on our buck that we would in parts of the south-east and London, but ultimately we will be substantially changing and improving the quality of people's lives in those areas, and it is about time we finally got a fair share of funding. I totally agree that we are stuck between a rock and a hard place in making decisions on covid. I have every sympathy with the businesses across Stoke-on-Trent, north Kidsgrove and Talke, but when we see the Royal Stoke having to go to level 4 for critical care and north Staffordshire having among the highest numbers of covid cases per 100,000 in the country, then ultimately it is only proper that I back the Government to ensure that the tier restrictions remain in place for now. However, I will obviously be pushing for tier 2 at the earliest opportunity that arises.

I suppose the key thing would be education, as my hon. Friend has already mentioned. Stoke-on-Trent is in the bottom 20% for take-up at levels 3 and 4. We have some of the worst results, in terms of national comparisons, for GCSE passes in English and maths, and when we look at the destinations of our students, we see very few going on to higher education or quality apprenticeships. We therefore need a proper free school programme, not just in my hon. Friend's constituency in wave 14, but a wave 15 announcement, to enable my constituency to get a disruptor free school, shake things up and ensure the Michaela-style education that I have signed up to and firmly believe in: high standards leading to high achievement.

We also need major investment in ceramics, through the advanced ceramics campus, which was mentioned in the wave 2 Strength in Places bid, which is being led by Lucideon. That can bring a huge economic drive back to Stoke-on-Trent and put us back on the map, not just nationally but globally, in terms of ceramics. Let us not forget that those aeroplanes would not fly if not for the ceramics sprayed on the internal combustion engines. Nor should we forget the ceramics that we all have in our mobile phones or the ceramics being used in healthcare today, which can help the health service get to net zero.

However, Churchill China, Steelite and Burleigh—these great companies of ceramic tableware; these giants of the world—need our help at this time, because they are reliant on hospitality and are part of the supply chain in the sector. While they have been grateful for the furlough scheme, which has certainly meant that they can survive, they have not seen the VAT cuts or the business rate reductions that others in their industry have, so please can we have that discussion? That should also include the brewers, such as Titanic Brewery, because without the brewers, we would not have the pubs. I fully empathise with my colleagues; the pubs are under strain, and while that £1,000 is welcome, it certainly will not cover the cost of Christmas trade lost. However, if the brewers go down, then ultimately so will the pubs, so we need to look further.

Silicon Stoke, which my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) alluded to, is an amazing opportunity. Some 104 km of gigabit is installed across the city already, which is about to plug into 100,000 homes and businesses across the city of Stoke-on-Trent, making us a UK leader. We have a once in a lifetime opportunity to become the heart of the video games industry, linking in with the skills produced at Staffordshire University, making us a real beacon. If we can be an enterprise zone for video games, it will incentivise those businesses and potential start-up grants across the city, pushed by the Independent Game Developers' Association—the trade association body of the video games industry. That will be an exciting opportunity for Stoke-on-Trent.

As the Minister also oversees housing, I do not want to miss the opportunity to plug the opportunity of brownfields. There are over 20 brownfield sites, totalling more than 80 acres, which are ripe for development. They are held back by the viability of the land, with low land values and high remediation costs. Meanwhile, there are other former factory sites of national importance, such as Price and Kensington Teapot Works in Longport, just outside the mother town of Burslem, which could be a catalyst for economic growth, but instead are being left to rot by absentee landowners.

Those areas have been forgotten by levelling up. There has not been forceful action against those who seek to bring an area down. I ask the Minister to back

[Jonathan Gullis]

my ten-minute rule Bill for the proper maintenance of land, which will remove the level 3 fine for absentee and rogue landowners, and instead allow the judge to make a decision about how seriously the owner has disregarded the local community and area and the local authority's call to do more. It is a simple change to the wording of the legislation. It would cost the Government absolutely nothing, but it would mean that we could finally take these rogue owners to court. It is not just Price and Kensington; places in Burslem are affected too.

I have one final plug for the heartbeat of my constituency that is always being forgotten, the sleeping giant that is Chatterley Whitfield colliery. It was the first mine to produce 1 million tonnes of coal a year, in 1937 and 1939. This is a daunting site, which will cost lots of money. I appreciate that, but if we take a step-by-step approach to break down the site and turn it into a proper business park mixed with a heritage centre, that sleeping giant can become a beacon of hope and opportunity. It could also potentially supply geothermal energy—my hon. Friend, and I recently had a call with the Coal Authority—that could help produce the new green industrial revolution, providing cleaner, greener and more affordable heating and electricity to the homes of north Staffordshire, which I know would go a long way.

The Minister has had lots of asks made of him. The town deal for Kidsgrove is in with his Department. I hope that will get the sign-off for the £25 million. Next, I will be coming for a share of money for Tunstall. I will be demanding that Burslem finally be made a pilot for high street regeneration and rejuvenation, because it is a ghost town. It has the most closed high street shops of anywhere in the UK, and it is about time the mother town is no longer forgotten.

3.38 pm

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I thank the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) for initiating this important debate. Only last week I was in this Chamber speaking on a debate about levelling up. That, too, was about areas in the north. The stark reality is that the north has faced decades of underfunding, which has only been exacerbated during this pandemic. All hon. Members spoke passionately about that underfunding.

In times like these, those years of failing to fund statutory services show their actual cracks. Sadly, the results have been deadly. People in the north have been more likely to have their working hours reduced or to have lost their jobs altogether. As the shadow Chancellor put it, bluntly and tragically, they have been more likely to die of covid-19.

Years of underfunding means that investment per person in the north Staffordshire pottery towns is less than half of that seen in London. Over the past decade in the region we have seen a decrease in both health and education investment per head. The north simply does not have enough beds in hospitals. The toll on hospitals in the north, therefore, is far more severe than those with capacity in the south. The impact on schools means that after years of underfunding, 75 out of 86 schools in Stoke-on-Trent are still in crisis, with an estimated £6.7 million shortfall in 2020 and £174 lost per pupil even before the effects of the pandemic.

At the beginning of this pandemic, I am sure Conservative Members will remember, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government promised to fund councils with whatever was needed. Councils are facing an estimated £1 billion funding gap this year. That estimate was made prior to the introduction of the national lockdown, so the gap could now grow to be in the region of £2 billion. We have already seen the Chancellor pursue a public sector pay freeze for those who worked day and night, the public sector workers putting themselves at risk to deliver for this nation during the hard times. If councils, including Stoke-on-Trent, do not receive the funding they need, those same people may also face job losses.

The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) recently raised the unfair formula from Government on pothole funding for Stoke-on-Trent. I share those concerns, though I would like to add it is not just in Stoke-on-Trent; our nation's roads are plagued by a pothole epidemic and the road maintenance backlog is valued at more than £10 billion.

Important investment projects were axed in 2010, only to resurface at greater cost later. Consecutive Governments have failed to provide the funding needed and now, when our public finances are already stretched with the pandemic, we are forced to accept a price we would not have needed to accept.

I want to follow up on the welcome, if slightly belated, announcement of the Government's plans for the UK Shared Prosperity fund and the levelling-up fund, both of which have the potential to provide much-needed funds to our communities. I hope the Minister can provide further clarity on both those funds. I understood from the Chancellor's statement last week that next year would see the launch of pilots of the types of scheme that the UK SPF will fund when it is eventually launched.

Will the Minister provide further details on how communities and local authorities will be able to access those pilots, and what form they might take? I am particularly interested, for example, whether he could confirm if partnerships of community organisations, local businesses and local authorities will be able to access this preparatory UK SPF funding next year. We have seen this year the value of local authorities and metro Mayors to their communities. Will any of the UK SPF be devolved to local or regional government to be distributed by them, working in their local communities?

The Chancellor also said in his statement last week that the whole of the UK will benefit from the UK SPF and, over time, we will ramp up funding, so that local domestic UK-wide funding would at least match EU receipts on average, reaching around £1.5 billion per year. The total funding, however, from EU receipts has been, on average, £2.1 billion per year, according to the House of Commons Library. Will the Minister clarify why there is that stark difference?

Finally on the UK SPF, will the Minister clarify why, given that the fund was first announced in the Conservative manifesto of the 2017 general election, we are only now trialling the fund? It is a shame, given the three years since that election, that we have not seen the design of the fund launched and consulted on, as was originally promised.

I would like to move on to the levelling-up fund, announced for the first time last week. I understand it is to be jointly administered by the Minister's Department,

the Treasury and the Department for Transport from Whitehall. As with the Towns fund, we welcome any investment into held-back towns across the country after a decade of neglect by this Government. There has, however, been much debate, both in Parliament and the press, about the way the towns fund was designed, with a host of deserving towns inexplicably losing out. Has the Minister taken any lessons from that into the design of the levelling-up fund, so that those bidding can be reassured that they will not be excluded from receiving investment at the whim of Ministers?

Will the Minister also tell us who will be able to submit bids to the fund, and who they will need to support bids? It would be helpful to understand, for example, how the value of an MP's support would be weighed against the support of a local council. I am sure that the Minister would not want to see deserving bids for funding submitted by councils fail because of the intransigence of a local MP. I am making a particular reference. We would not like to see another situation where one Minister signs off another Minister's £25 million for their local town when those are marginal seats. That would be a travesty.

We gather from the Chancellor's statement that the fund will be based on competitive bids, so will the Minister clarify what steps his Department will take to ensure that all of our communities are able to put bids together, and that the poorest are not disadvantaged? Finally, I hope he will also confirm if the focus of the fund on growth and regeneration outcomes encompasses social values, community wealth building and inclusive economic development.

3.45 pm

The Minister for Housing (Christopher Pincher): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. It is a great pleasure to respond to the eloquent speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) and by those colleagues from around Staffordshire. It is a particular pleasure to supplant my hon, Friend the Minister for Regional Growth and Local Government, who was gazetted to respond to the debate. Because he was not able to be here, it gives me the rare opportunity of a journey home on a Tuesday afternoon and to be among friends and colleagues who are among some of the best Members of Parliament in our House of Commons. They represent the most dynamic, most determined and most go-ahead county in the country. I should, of course, declare an interest: I am a Member of Parliament for Staffordshire.

It was pleasing to hear the fine speeches of my colleagues and of the commitment of my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South to securing the best possible future for Stoke-on-Trent and north Staffordshire. I assure him it is entirely the ambition of the Government to achieve his ends. Levelling up is central to our agenda. That is why we have set out a clear commitment to unlocking economic prosperity across all areas of our country. Levelling up is about providing the momentum to address the sorts of long-standing regional inequalities that we have heard mentioned by colleagues around the Chamber and to provide the means to pursue life chances that have been previously out of touch for so many.

Last week, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced a new £4 billion levelling-up fund that has been discussed today. That will supersede the existing local growth fund streams with something like £600 million being available next year across England. I will say a word or two about that in a moment.

To help people to prepare for the introduction of the UK Shared Prosperity fund—a point raised by Members across the Chamber and, by the way, we are a big-hearted county and are pleased to welcome interlopers from West Yorkshire such as the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) and to hear their points about northern counties—we will next year provide £220 million to support communities across the UK to pilot programmes and new approaches. The UK-wide investment framework will be announced in 2021 and that will confirm the multi-year funding profiles in the next spending review. These deliverables are hugely important in Stoke-on-Trent and north Staffordshire to address the barriers to growth and to harness the energy and enthusiasm that local leaders and Members of Parliament have to unlock the ambitious opportunities for the local area and ensure a strong economic recovery from covid-19.

I am pleased that two towns in north Staffordshire were invited to submit proposals for town deals as part of our £3.6 billion towns fund. It is key to our levelling-up agenda and those landmark deals will see millions invested in projects across the country. Kidsgrove submitted its town investment plan in October; it is currently being assessed by officials. Newcastle-under-Lyme is due to submit its town investment plan in January next year. If that is successful, those areas will have the opportunity to invest in their local economies at this critical time. I wish all power to their elbow in those endeavours.

I am particularly pleased that the town deal boards in Kidsgrove and Newcastle-under-Lyme are working closely with members of their local community, alongside businesses, investors and local government, to achieve that end. We will bring forward a competitive round of the Towns fund in due course, and will also welcome further proposals from all local authorities to transform our towns and high streets.

On the issue of high streets, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell), the need for regeneration is particularly evident. High streets in our country have seen considerable declines in the last decade, and have certainly been affected by covid-19. Our Future High Streets fund is designed to revitalise and reimagine the important roles these places have. We want to help high streets to adapt and evolve, and also to remain vibrant and safe places at the heart of our local communities. We hope to make announcements of the successful submissions before the end of the year, and I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme will be eagerly awaiting that announcement.

A number of hon. and right hon. Members raised the issue of the levelling-up fund, which was announced at the spending review by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) mentioned the fund with all his usual enthusiasm and determination, but I caution him for being occasionally just a little too modest. To describe investment in Stoke-on-Trent as a risk is overly modest. We regard investment in Stoke-on-Trent as an opportunity—an opportunity to be harnessed. I hope that, through the levelling-up fund and the six

[Christopher Pincher]

hundred millions that will be made available through it, there will be opportunities to be had for cities such as Stoke-on-Trent.

This is a cross-departmental fund that will invest in local infrastructure. It will have a visible effect on people and their communities, and will support local recovery in high-value projects such as bypasses, road schemes and railway station upgrades—the sorts of things mentioned by a number of colleagues—as well as upgrades to town centres, community infrastructure and also local arts and culture. The fund will be open to all local areas in England and will prioritise bids to drive growth and regeneration in places that need it: the sorts of places that have seen particular challenges, and areas that have received less Government investment in recent and past years. I hope that my colleagues around north Staffordshire will be pricking up their ears at those points.

The £100 million brownfield regeneration fund that we are making available was also mentioned. We have already invested £400 million in mayoral combined authorities, which will unlock something like 26,000 new homes. I rather hope that the £100 million that we are making available—which will be spread in places other than mayoral combined authorities—will also have the same salutary effect. I certainly heard what my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North and others said about the 20 sites and 80 acres of available land in Stoke-on-Trent North. I will be keeping my eye on Stoke and north Staffordshire to that end.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley) made the important point about business certainty. That is on the mind of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and all Ministers, as we look to emerge from the pandemic crisis. They will want to look carefully to give businesses as much notice as possible of changes to the tiering system, but they will of course also want to look at the most up-to-date evidence available on which to base their decisions. They have to balance the data with the lead time, to give businesses the right sort of notice. I am sure that they will have both considerations on their minds.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands also encouraged me to lobby the Chancellor of the Exchequer and to speak favourably of the funding formula and the way value for money is considered. I say to her, and to hon. Members around the Chamber, that not all good ideas start in the Treasury, but good ideas can end there if the Treasury does not like them. However, to the best of my ability, I will always endeavour to represent to the Chancellor my local interest and that of my colleagues and friends in Staffordshire, in order to make sure the right and best decisions are made in the interests of our constituents, as well as the interests of all hon. Members' constituents around the country.

It is probably worth me saying a word about the business support we have provided to Stoke-on-Trent during the pandemic. Something like £13.9 million has gone to support businesses that closed between 5 November and 2 December, on top of the £120 billion of funding that has been made available to businesses. I probably do not have enough time to go through this topic in detail, but let me say that the Government are committed to doing whatever it takes to support businesses big and small around our country to get through and recover from this pandemic. The sooner a business can get back to work, the sooner people can get back to their normal lives, and the sooner we can recover from this pandemic and get our economy back on the road.

I was particularly struck by what all colleagues said about the ceramic valley. I am aware of the fantastic progress being made in the ceramic valley enterprise zone. The successful regeneration of long-abandoned sites such as Tunstall Arrow, Highgate and Ravensdale is a great success story and has created something like 900 new jobs. I know that local councils, the local enterprise partnership and Members of Parliament have been working in harmony to maximise the potential of that enterprise zone, and I certainly hope to play my part in encouraging that still further. I am also conscious that, as this century develops, we want to make sure that places such as Staffordshire and Stoke are tech hubs. Stoke might not be in a valley, but it is certainly a city that can be on a hill, as an exemplar of what can be done with technological advancement. We started 100 years ago as anthracite Staffordshire; now we are becoming silicon, with Silicon Stoke at the heart of that great advance, and the Government will continue to support those advances to the best of their energies and endeavours.

My hon. Friends also mentioned transport. The Department for Transport is responsible for the Transforming Cities fund: a crucial £29 million's worth of investment, which can do so much to change the way in which the transport infrastructure of Stoke and, indeed, north Staffordshire is designed. I believe that an announcement on that is imminent. It would be entirely wrong of me to speak for my right hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps), but I am sure he will be looking closely and favourably at that bid, and I trust that my hon. Friends and colleagues from Staffordshire will hear more about it soon.

I should also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South on his doughty campaign in favour of Fenton. I hear entirely what he says about its importance, and I will carry his remarks to my right hon. and hon. Friends in the Department for Transport. It may be that Fenton was forgotten by Arnold Bennett, but my hon. Friend has certainly not forgotten it, and nor have I.

In conclusion, British prosperity will be sustained by those who capture and capitalise on those opportunities to level up their communities, deliver enduring change, and develop sustainability. The pottery towns of Stoke-on-Trent and north Staffordshire are places where such people exist, and we must capitalise on their resources and revitalise their area.

3.59 pm

Jack Brereton: It is a delight to have a Staffordshire colleague responding as the Minister, and it is fantastic to hear his support for Stoke-on-Trent and north Staffordshire. We have heard some fantastic contributions from neighbouring colleagues from across north Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent. I can assure the Minister that we will be putting in some very strong bids for the levelling-up fund. We want some of that funding to come to Stoke-on-Trent and north Staffordshire, so we will be putting in strong bids that will ensure we can recover strongly from covid, better than we were before, and get our economy back on track. We will get our

country and Stoke-on-Trent levelled up, so that we can get those opportunities into the city and into north Staffordshire.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Government's levelling-up agenda and post covid-19 economic recovery in North Staffordshire Potteries towns.

4 pm

Sitting suspended.

Covid-19: Hospital Parking Charges for NHS Staff

[Sir Charles Walker *in the Chair*]

4.1 pm

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered parking charges for NHS staff at hospitals during the covid-19 outbreak.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. The pandemic has made many things clear: it has exposed the deep inequalities in our society and highlighted that it is the labour of working people that keeps society going. Perhaps more than anything else, it has shown the value of our NHS and its staff. NHS doctors, nurses, cleaners and porters have been incredible throughout the pandemic, working tirelessly on behalf of us all to defeat the virus. They deserve huge thanks and recognition for their courage and determination, so I begin by paying tribute to NHS staff at University Hospital Coventry and Warwickshire and across the country. I thank them for all that they do.

Thanks alone are not enough; NHS staff deserve much more than that. In the spring, in response to the public outpouring of support for the NHS, the Government announced that parking would be made free for staff during the pandemic. The Government said that NHS staff should be able to

"carry out their vital work without worrying about paying for car parking"

and that they would provide

"the financial backing NHS Trusts need to make this a reality".

That pledge was, of course, welcomed by NHS staff across the country. So far, so good.

The pledge has been regularly repeated by the Government since. On 8 July, the Prime Minister told the House of Commons that

"hospital car parks are free for NHS staff for this pandemic".—[*Official Report*, 8 July 2020; Vol. 678, c. 966.]

Last month, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care repeated that, telling "Good Morning Britain" viewers that

"We don't have parking charges in English hospitals and we're not going to for the course of this pandemic."

That all sounds well and good. The only problem is that it is not true, and has not been for many months.

As far back as June, parking charges were reintroduced for NHS staff at University Hospital Coventry and Warwickshire. Ever since, staff have been made to pay for parking. Similar things have happened at NHS trusts across the country. Charges were brought back at the nearby University Hospitals Birmingham and at the South Warwickshire NHS Trust, as well as in places as far afield as the Harrogate District Hospital and Wye Valley NHS Trust. Even now, as the second wave puts renewed pressure on NHS staff, charges are being reintroduced.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): As I said to the hon. Lady and the Minister outside, during the first wave of coronavirus, trusts and the health board in Northern Ireland did away with the charges, but restarted them after the covid wave had passed. Now that the second wave has come, they are considering stopping the charges again. Does she feel that the example from Northern Ireland and elsewhere indicates a need to subsidise staff during the covid-19 outbreak? Clearly, their work, which saves us all, is a priority.

Zarah Sultana: I agree. We see in Scotland and Wales that staff parking is free, because parking is free for everyone. Northern Ireland has also shown leadership in this field, and I hope that our Government here in Westminster follow suit.

As of today, it is reported that staff at the Royal Cornwall Hospital Trust will have to pay for parking. Quite simply, I and many others can see that the Government have promised free parking for NHS staff throughout the pandemic and funding for NHS trusts to make this possible, but they have unfortunately broken that promise. Parking charges have been reintroduced for NHS staff, during a global pandemic. From clapping for carers, we are now clamping carers. Frankly, that is scandalous and no way to thank our incredible NHS staff.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that our hard-working NHS staff, who put their lives on the line every day and are currently suffering from anxiety and mental health issues, need to be supported in a better way than clapping and need to have free parking reintroduced? I have heard that charges are going up by 200%. Does she believe that this should be stopped?

Zarah Sultana: I will touch on the mental health of NHS staff later, but my hon. Friend makes the point that some trusts are introducing parking charges, in some cases with a 200% increase, which is absolutely scandalous. The Government should provide enough funding to cover the gaps from a decade of cuts to the NHS. I will talk later about increasing NHS pay so that actual rewards and recognition are given to our NHS staff.

When I asked the Prime Minister about this in the Chamber, he promised to look into it and get back to me. I have heard nothing since and would be very interested to hear the Minister's update today. It appears that the Prime Minister and Health Secretary are so out of touch that they do not even know that this has happened.

This is not just about the Government failing to keep their word; it is about public safety and basic fairness. Working on the frontline, NHS staff are already more exposed to the virus. As the Royal College of Nursing and UNISON highlight, travelling to work by car reduces the risk of NHS staff catching or spreading the virus. Reintroducing parking charges makes that safer option more expensive. It also makes it more unaffordable for some workers. To ensure public safety, parking charges must be abolished throughout the pandemic.

But it is not just that; NHS staff are battling the virus day in, day out. Some tell me how exhausted they feel, pushed to breaking point by the pandemic. One nurse at the Royal Victoria Infirmary in Newcastle told me:

"We are exhausted, we are on our knees".

She told me that staff are acting outside their roles, working overtime for free and being redeployed across wards and positions to try to cover the gaps. Another told me how frightening battling covid has been, with consistent failures to provide NHS staff with proper PPE. A *Sunday Mirror* investigation found that healthcare workers needed almost 2 million days off for mental illness in the first wave, with doctors and nurses suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and more than 2,000 doctors quitting the profession since March. Tragically, we know that more than 200 health and care workers have lost their lives to the virus.

Even now, staff are being forced to use repurposed bin bags as official PPE at some hospitals in the UK. It is not a surprise that a British Medical Association study found that nearly three-quarters of its members fear that they will be overwhelmed this winter. Nurses in Coventry tell me that morale is at rock bottom, but the stress and overwork that NHS staff experience are not new. They did not begin with the pandemic. Instead, a decade of NHS underfunding and privatisation has left NHS staff underpaid and overworked. Nurses' and doctors' pay has fallen by more than 8% and 9% respectively since 2010. Many cleaners and porters are on less than the real living wage.

Underfunding means that we now spend 22% less per head on health than France and 47% less than Germany. It is in this context that NHS staff are being battered by a Government that have overworked and overstretched them for 10 years. A deadly second wave is hitting our hospitals and we see the Government have let parking charges be introduced. Can the Minister tell me how this is fair? One member of staff at University Hospital Coventry and Warwickshire told me that the move has felt like a kick in the teeth. She said:

"Staff feel totally undervalued and unappreciated."

What will the Minister say to them? At another hospital, a student nurse has spoken out about how demoralising it felt to get a parking fine after she worked a 13-hour shift. Another told me:

"Staff give and give and give and get nothing in return, not even a free place to park our car."

Another described how he is,

"incensed that we are expected to pay to park in the middle of a global pandemic. This is happening while nurses are using food banks and are leaving the profession in their thousands."

Such problems with parking are not new. I have been told how low pay and high parking charges have forced staff to quit the jobs they love. There are reports that parking charges could dramatically rise, with recent revelations showing that one NHS trust plans to raise charges for staff by 200%.

Some NHS trusts are under such financial strain that they feel they have no choice but to reintroduce charges. Staff tell me that that underfunding has become so extreme that parking charges are used to subsidise frontline care costs, meaning that NHS staff are victims of what one healthcare worker described as a stealth tax, paying for the NHS twice: once through taxation and again through parking at work. In Coventry, a private company runs hospital parking, lining its pockets from the hard work of NHS staff.

In the past, hospital parking charges have been justified on the grounds that abolishing than is not feasible. Tell that to the people of Wales, where charges for staff, patients and visitors were abolished more than a decade ago. If anyone thinks that there is something different or unique about England; that here we somehow cannot abolish charges, that has been thoroughly debunked by the simple fact that for three months at the start of the pandemic, charges were abolished. It is not a question of feasibility; it is simply a question of political will. The Government just need to find the will to intervene, to provide the funds for trusts and to guarantee free parking, just like they said they would.

In the spring, Ministers clapped for NHS staff. Instead of more empty gestures, I call on them today to give our NHS staff the recognition they deserve. Start off by guaranteeing free parking for all NHS staff, and this time make it permanent. That is the very least they can do. It should not stop there—parking charges are an unfair second tax on staff, but they are also a tax on patients and on visitors seeing loved ones. Parking charges should also be abolished for patients and visitors.

NHS staff have faced a decade of falling pay, for which the current pay deal does not compensate. The French Government have stepped in to give their healthcare workers a pay rise totalling £7.2 billion. Our Government need to do the same, so I call on them to give NHS staff a fair pay rise of 15% to make up for a decade of lost pay, and to end the creeping privatisation of the NHS, which has seen resources taken away from frontline services and channelled to private healthcare companies. If the Minister says there is no money for this, I say to him that the Government have just found £16 billion for the military. Let us fund the NHS instead. Our priority should be welfare, not warfare.

I will finish with a series of questions for the Minister. Does the Minister acknowledge that the Government have broken their promise and allowed parking charges to be reintroduced during the global pandemic? Will he apologise to NHS staff for this broken promise? Will he urgently work to reverse this situation, and bring back free parking for NHS staff in Coventry and across the country? Will he move on from empty gestures for the NHS and instead commit to permanent free parking, a fair pay rise, and the funding the NHS needs for the future?

4.14 pm

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar): It has always been a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles, not least on the Procedure Committee, which you chaired when I was first elected to this House.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana) on securing this important debate. I know that this is an issue that she in particular, with other hon. Members, has taken a very close interest in, and it is a timely debate. Before I turn to the specifics of the issue and the hon. Lady's points, like her, I would like once again to put on record my gratitude and thanks to our NHS and care workers, including those at her local hospital trust. They, as always, continue to do an amazing job in the face of this incredibly challenging pandemic.

To address one of the hon. Lady's points, I know she will very much welcome and be encouraged by the fact that the Government have put in place a £33.9 billion increase in investment in the NHS, the biggest increase in investment by any Government of recent years. I know she will welcome that very clear investment by this Government in our NHS. However, as she said, it is important that, in the face of this pandemic, as well as thanking our NHS workers, we have taken practical steps as a country and as a Government to further support them. One of those steps has been funding the provision of free parking for NHS staff at work during the pandemic since the spring, as she set out.

As the hon. Lady will know, parking is determined at trust level. While I appreciate she is critical of trust decisions in this space, and that of course is her right, in acknowledging that, I also express gratitude to the trusts that did, following the Government's clear statement, provide free parking, and to local councils whose provision of free parking space for NHS staff made that possible. As the Prime Minister stated in the House on 8 July:

> "The hospital car parks are free for NHS staff for this pandemic—they are free now—and we are going to get on with our manifesto commitment to make them free for patients who need them as well."—[*Official Report*, 8 July 2020; Vol. 678, c. 966.]

That remains the policy of Her Majesty's Government.

I am conscious that the hon. Lady has previously raised a specific question about her own trust, which she also asked today, and which I will seek to address. NHS trusts have control of their parking policies. We, the Government, have made it very clear that we expect individual trusts to follow the approach that I have just outlined and that the Prime Minister set out. To her specific point, trusts have received and continue to receive additional funding to do so, to ensure that they do not lose income. I hope that her trust and others will recognise that, but if it is helpful to her, I will write to her after the debate with more specific information about her local trust and the specific points she raised about its income and funding and the position it has taken on this.

It is, however, also important to set out the broader context, while not losing sight of the clear expectation that trusts will fulfil that policy position. As I say, as the hon. Lady knows, the decision rests with trusts.

Zarah Sultana: What I hear from the conversations I have had at University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire is that the money has not continued to come; it has stopped. The Minister makes the point that NHS trusts have decision-making powers around parking, and I want to clarify that point, because I find that it then becomes a decision on whether to fund parking or frontline services, and it should not be a choice between those two. There should be enough funding for frontline services and additional funding for parking, so that trusts do not have to make a decision between those.

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. I will come on to the specific point about funding for this commitment in probably about a page or so's time in my notes, but I go back to the £33.9 billion increase by 2023-24. The Government have given the NHS the money it said it wanted and needed to fund its services and, in addition, we have funded covid costs over and above that settlement.

Turning to the broader context, which is not just about funding, during the first wave of the pandemic, not only were hospital car parks largely empty of patients and visitors, but high streets are empty and so were council and commercial car parks, which local authorities were able to make available to NHS workers for free. That helped to address the fundamental challenge, which is not primarily funding, but capacity in hospital car parks.

While some trusts have significant capacity in their car parks, a very large number, even before the current situation, saw demand for spaces significantly exceed a limited capacity. By way of a little statistical context, overall, the NHS has around 440,000 spaces on its estate. That is set against over 1.3 million staff, and that is even before visitors or patients are factored into the demand side of the equation.

[Edward Argar]

In recent months, we have seen patient and visitor usage of commercial car parks return. As activity has returned to shops and high streets since the summer, we have seen increased demand for those parking spaces that were available during the height of the first wave. This all means a return to significant demand exceeding a finite supply of available parking spaces. As set out in our manifesto, it is important that the patients and visitors who most need parking can access it, alongside our amazing NHS staff.

I will briefly address the issue of funding that the hon. Lady raised, and the concerns about a potential loss of trust income or trust funding. During the pandemic, we have provided trusts with specific funding for free parking for NHS staff. They continue to receive funding for that, currently as part of the overall system of funding allocation we have put in place. However, as I said, I will look into the hon. Lady's specific point about her trust and how the allocation of the funding coming through that system is done, to reassure her that her trust continues to be supported through that overall pot.

Alongside the Prime Minister's clearly stated commitment on NHS staff parking, he referenced our manifesto commitment, the context of which I will touch upon, including what we are doing to increase capacity to address that fundamental, underlying challenge. Some trusts began implementing the manifesto commitment earlier in the year. However, we fully recognise—and did recognise—the need for trusts, given the pandemic, to focus both on implementing the staff parking measures and on their operational response to the pandemic and ensuring they were there for all patients who needed them. We understand that, for reasons that I am sure all reasonable people would understand, many trusts delayed the planned phased roll-out due to take place over the course of this year, reflecting that external context.

The commitment will ensure that, in the course of this Parliament, disabled blue badge holders, frequent outpatient attendees, parents of children staying overnight, as well as night shift NHS staff, will be given free parking at hospitals. This will be the first time that hospital car parking has been completely free in this country for those groups who need it most. It will be mandated by NHS England and NHS Improvement on trusts from 1 January 2021. That mandating process, which takes considerable time, is the only lever by which trusts can be compelled to do this. That is why I say that the decision rests with trusts.

However, we recognise that in the midst of a second wave, flexibility is required. To have both policies operating at the same time will be a challenge for some sites, particularly in urban areas where capacity is limited. As we face this second wave, trusts' clear focus is on operationally tackling the pandemic and responding to it. I am sure that all reasonable people will recognise the need for roll-out flexibility in the context of the mandating, and given the focus of our NHS on their responsibilities in tackling the pandemic.

On the capacity issues, the Government are committed to increasing hospital car parking capacity. I set out the challenge earlier, but we have set aside over £200 million of capital funding for the financial year to do this. This money is available to trusts to modernise and expand their car parking facilities, and to utilise technology, such as automatic number plate recognition systems, to make parking easier for patients. Trusts will be invited to bid for this funding in the usual way, and we will ensure that they have full details of how they can do that.

The Government have been clear on their commitment on staff parking. We have adhered to that commitment, and continued to provide the funding for it. I will give the hon. Lady more detailed granular information for her trust. We have made significant progress since the announcement of our manifesto commitment. We remain committed to providing free car parking for NHS staff during the pandemic, as the Prime Minister made very clear, and to ensuring that NHS hospital parking is free for those who need it the most, in line with our manifesto commitment that we are clear we will deliver. We must do that while ensuring that the NHS has the necessary resources to deliver the commitment successfully, both in terms of capacity and meeting the revenue funding cost.

Again, I thank the hon. Member for Coventry South for securing the debate and for the tone, by and large, that she adopted. I know she feels passionately about this matter, and it is right that she brings that passion, her knowledge and her constituents' specific concerns to the House. I hope I have answered her points from the Dispatch Box, but I will of course come back to her about any that I have not been able to provide specific detail on in due course.

Question put and agreed to.

4.25 pm

Sitting suspended.

Defence Procurement and Supply Chains

4.27 pm

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered defence procurement and supply chains.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles. I am most grateful to hon. Members for participating in this important debate. I especially want to thank the Minister for Defence Procurement for being here today. I look forward to working closely with him on this issue in future and would welcome the opportunity to meet him to discuss the matter further.

The question before the House is broad and multifaceted, with profound implications not only for the UK's national security, but for the domestic industry and the many left-behind towns that are home to Ministry of Defence suppliers. I hope that, in the short time available to us, we will have a suitable and wide-ranging discussion.

I warmly welcome the breadth of experience that hon. Members bring to today's proceedings, whether they have served in our armed forces or come, as I do, from a trade union background or have experience in Government.

Today's debate could not be more timely. It takes place amid an economic crisis unlike any in recent memory. Across the country, joblessness continues to soar and unemployment might hit more than 3 million by spring 2021. British industry has been especially hit badly by covid-19 and the resulting lockdown. Already we see a haemorrhaging of jobs across the sector, with left-behind towns in the north and midlands bearing the brunt.

Thousands of workers at companies such as Bentley, Airbus and Safran Nacelles now find their jobs under threat. The scale of the crisis has been starkly illustrated by the situation of Rolls-Royce, Barnoldswick, where operations have been offshored and striking workers locked out of the plant just before Christmas.

The job losses are not confined to plant manufacturing sites. Wider supply chains have been devastated as well, with 5,000 lost in aerospace alone. As the Institute for Public Policy Research has demonstrated, redundancies in this sector have a disproportionate impact on local economies, compounding the already high levels of deprivation and joblessness found in towns such as Birkenhead.

Meanwhile, the UK is struggling to adapt to a fast-changing and volatile global situation. Our departure from the European Union risks leaving us more isolated on the world stage, while the threat posed by non-state actors and cyber-terrorism continues to grow. My argument is simple: defence procurement has a vital role to play in helping British industry to survive the current crisis. The demand for British manufacturing has slumped, but the need for high-tech cutting-edge defence projects remains as pressing as ever, and British suppliers are well placed to meet the demand.

The Chancellor stated in the spending review that there would be additional funding of more than £24 billion in cash terms for defence in the next four years, including more than £6 billion for research and development. The Government say that they are serious about levelling up the UK and building back better. If that is the case, it is imperative that the additional funding goes towards projects that sustain high-skilled employment and provide quality training opportunities to young people across the country.

The argument is not just an economic one; it is also about national security. When the pandemic first struck, it exposed dangerous vulnerabilities in international supply chains. If we are to keep Britain safe in an uncertain world, we must maintain sovereign capabilities and build up our onshore defence industry. We have heard a great deal in recent years about the supposedly draconian restrictions placed on the UK by the European Union, but where our European neighbours rightly exploit the freedom afforded to them on defence procurement, the UK all too regularly buys off the shelf and undermines British industry by opening up defence contracts to international competition. It is not just British manufacturers that lose out, but the British people through the loss of taxes, GDP growth and high-skilled jobs, which are already all too rare in a modern economy. That is why the public overwhelmingly support prioritising British manufacturers for defence projects.

There have been promising developments in recent years. In fact, there is a growing consensus that defence procurement has a vital role to play in supporting domestic industries, and making the UK more secure by improving sovereign capabilities. That was recognised in the 2015 strategic defence and security review, which called for promoting prosperity to be recognised as a core national security objective. It is similarly reflected in the national shipbuilding strategy proposal that defence vessels should only be open to UK competition and the incorporation of a national value framework into the combat air strategy.

There remains much more to be done. My party has called for a new defence industrial strategy that expands the definition of good value to include support for British manufacturers, small to medium-sized enterprises, and the high-skilled jobs that they create. I want to talk about what that would mean for the shipbuilding industry.

British shipbuilding and ship repair is a £2 billion industry that regularly employs 32,000 people in the UK and supports 20,000 jobs in the wider supply chain. Shipbuilding also accounts for 60% of defence spending in the north-west, and of course I have the great privilege of my constituency being home to the historic Cammell Laird shipyard. Despite significant challenges in recent decades, Cammell Laird has continued to provide high-skilled jobs and meaningful training opportunities to 700 people in Birkenhead. It is staying ahead of the curve. Just last month, it launched the RRS Sir David Attenborough, perhaps the most technologically sophisticated vessel produced in this country in the past three decades. As a passionate advocate of vocational training, I am delighted that it continues to provide opportunities for young people in my constituency. More than 300 young people have been offered apprenticeships in the past decade, with 51 starting this year.

Now Cammell Laird stands to benefit from the construction of the new fleet solid support ships for the Royal Fleet Auxiliary. Along with Babcock International, Rolls-Royce and BAE Systems, Cammell Laird is part of a team UK consortium that was shortlisted for the contract before the competition was suspended last

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November. Those companies represent the very best of British manufacturing and the benefits of building those ships in the UK are obvious. It would create or secure at least 6,500 jobs across the country, including hundreds at Cammell Laird. Of the £800 million spent on the new support vessels, at least £250,000 would be returned to Treasury coffers through income tax, national insurance and lower welfare payments. That is why I welcome the announcement by the Secretary of State for Defence that the vessels will be classified as warships, guaranteeing that they will be built in Britain.

That is in line with the recommendations contained in Sir John Parker's inquiry into the national shipbuilding strategy, but I am now hearing concerns that the Ministry of Defence could accept bids from consortiums including and even led by foreign companies. I echo the calls of my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar), the Vice-Chair of the Defence Committee. The Government must provide cast-iron guarantees that the ships will be built in British shipyards. I hope the Minister will be able to provide us with that assurance today.

Building the ships in Britain will not just benefit the hundreds of workers who will be guaranteed gainful employment for another decade or the young people whose horizons will be expanded through the provision of quality apprenticeships; it also means more work for the countless suppliers who provide the shipyards with parts and logistical support. It will mean more money spent in our town's shops, restaurants and hospitality venues, which have been so devastated by the national lockdown, and it will mean more revenue for our local council, which is working tirelessly to support some of the poorest and most vulnerable people in the country. In short, it will mean hope for the town of Birkenhead.

The fleet solid support ships are not the only defence project that has a role to play in kick-starting the economy. There are many others, perched on the slipway and ready to launch. This includes the new tranche of Typhoon combat aircraft, the Merlin Mk 2 helicopters and the Boxer armoured fighting vehicles, which are all ready to go into production. By placing an order for the new Type 26 frigates now, the Ministry of Defence could get the supply chain for long-lead items running. The Government should also consider bringing in phase 2 of the Tempest project, which has been scheduled for 2022 and 2023. Those are the kind of shovel-ready projects the Prime Minister has spoken about so often.

In short, this is not a plea for little England-style nationalism; it is about providing a practical and effective way of rebuilding British industry so that it can address the needs of people in this country in the face of years of neglect and decline. By ensuring that these projects are built in Britain, the Government have the opportunity to prove that they mean what they say about levelling up and building back better. It is in their gift to provide towns such as Birkenhead, Barnoldswick and Barrow-in-Furness with the jobs and training opportunities they deserve.

Last month, Remembrance Sunday provided us with an opportunity to honour not only those who have served in previous conflicts, but all those who continue to keep Britain safe. It is incumbent on us, in turn, to ensure that they are as safe as they can possibly be, and that means ensuring that they are equipped with state-of-the-art equipment, all built in Britain.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): I call Simon Fell. I will give Mr Fell four minutes, but that is it.

4.37 pm

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): Thank you, Sir Charles. I will try to be quicker than that. I thank the hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley) for securing this important and timely debate. We keep hearing the phrase "levelling up" and the hon. Gentleman mentioned it. The Prime Minister tells us that it is his mission to level up the country, and for communities such as mine in the north that is a welcome prospect. We need to recognise just how important the defence supply chain is to that agenda.

In my constituency, we build the nuclear deterrent, and when I say we, I mean 10,000 of the most skilled, world-leading workers imaginable building submarines with a complexity rivalled perhaps only by what NASA does. That work—the completion of the Astute-class boats and the delivery of the four Dreadnought-class boats—is the beating heart of Barrow and Furness and our local economy.

Not to labour that metaphor, but if the work in the yard is the heart, then the supply chain is the blood that runs through our communities, keeping our businesses alive through Cumbria and beyond. The supply chain spend alone was £1 billion in 2019 from the submarine programme. That supports 80-plus businesses in Cumbria, but it does far more than that. It trains apprentices and creates skills clusters that attract even more businesses and further investment. Used well—don't get me wrong, I would far rather see more supply chain spend in Cumbria—defence procurement can be transformative.

BAE in Barrow has recognised what it needs to do to invest in our communities to do its job well. To produce boats to a steady and reliable drumbeat, it needs to invest in our towns to make sure we can stand on our own two feet and that we are creating the people with the skills to keep fuel in that machine. I applaud it for acting in that way. It backed our local schools and college, it led Barrow's successful town deal—I especially give credit to Steve Cole from BAE on that—and it is championing a learning quarter in our town, which will bring a university campus into Barrow and address the fundamental problem that towns such as mine have, where there is a brain drain of young people leaving to the bright lights of big cities like Manchester and Liverpool.

In Furness, defence spending is not just about submarines; it is about backing education and skills, backing local businesses and providing resilience for our local economy in these troubled times. I welcome the upcoming defence and security industrial strategy, which I hope will lead to much more of this in communities like mine; frankly, it is very badly needed.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): I call Christina Rees. You have four minutes.

4.40 pm

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley) on securing this debate.

Aerospace and defence are inextricably linked, and are a cornerstone of the Welsh economy. Last year in Wales, the sector had a turnover of £6 billion, which is 10% of the UK total, and it employed 23,000 people before covid-19. In Wales, we have Raytheon Technologies' airborne surveillance aircraft division at Broughton, BAE Systems at Glascoed, General Dynamics at Oakdale and Merthyr, Airbus Defence and Space at Newport, Thales at the National Digital Exploitation Centre in Ebbw Vale and West Wales airport in Aberporth. I welcome today's news that the Ministry of Defence has announced that BAE has secured a new £2.4 billion next generation munitions solution contract, which will sustain 4,000 jobs in the UK over 15 years, with 550 of those at Glascoed.

The Welsh Government have provided support mechanisms for innovation and manufacturing in the defence sector. I will mention just two. The advanced manufacturing and research institute at MOD Sealand in Flintshire is unique in providing the UK with a defence-led R&D centre of excellence, which will create a technology and innovation cluster aligned to emerging technologies and capabilities, with long-term commercial opportunities.

The second project is Thales' NDEC, which was opened in Ebbw Vale at the beginning of the year, supported by Welsh Government funding and in partnership with the University of South Wales. It will increase the cyber and digital knowledge base across business, education and academia, and will focus on protecting critical national infrastructure. There are opportunities for Thales in Tempest, as well.

Those two projects are examples of the Welsh Government working with the private sector, in partnership with the MOD. I call on the Minister to maintain and enhance this relationship to develop Britain's sovereign capability, support economic growth across the UK's nations and regions, and promote a levelling-up agenda that includes a positive weighting for British-based and Welsh companies for MOD procurement.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): I call Grahame Morris. You have four minutes, although you do not need to take four minutes if you do not need them.

4.43 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): Thank you, Sir Charles. I thank my good and hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley) for securing this important debate, which is particularly timely given the extra £16 billion of defence funding that was announced in last week's spending review.

Defence contracts represent an excellent opportunity for the UK economy and for job creation and retention in Britain. It is vital—I am addressing these remarks to the Minister in particular—that defence projects have a domestic focus, with a particular emphasis on maintaining jobs and the skills base in the UK.

Unite members at the Rolls-Royce site in Barnoldswick are currently being forced to take industrial action, because Rolls-Royce is cutting 350 highly-skilled jobs and offshoring them to Singapore. Workers at the plant fear that this latest round of job cuts will spell the end of the site itself, as it will likely become unviable as a result. The Barnoldswick workforce actually helped to set up the Singapore site, having been given promises that it would never put the home site at risk—a gross betrayal of loyal staff.

Unite the union understands that this work will remain at the site in Barnoldswick, at least for now, due to international arms trafficking regulations. However, the latest job cuts at Barnoldswick call into question the very viability of the site, and whether work on the joint strike fighter lift fan blade will be transferred to Singapore.

While Singapore may be a safe and secure country at the moment, there are concerns that this technology needs to be protected. On the 80th anniversary of the battle of Britain, the striking workers rightly believe that it is a disgrace that the Barnoldswick site is under threat, given its heritage and the important role that it played in supplying the components for Merlin engines, which kept the Spitfires flying in the battle of Britain.

As part of its long-standing history in supporting British defence, Rolls-Royce has benefited from vast amounts of UK taxpayer money, not only in loans, grants, tax breaks and R&D, but in the form of defence contracts. Rolls-Royce will no doubt be keen to secure a large slice of the £16 billion extra defence funding budget announced by the Chancellor, but the situation at Rolls-Royce is one that must be avoided elsewhere. I still hope that the Government will intervene with Rolls-Royce. Workers at Barnoldswick are highly skilled. The jobs at Barnoldswick are exactly the type we need to create and retain in the United Kingdom. Defence projects must have a defence focus. It is vital for the short-term and long-term health of the UK economy.

I had the privilege of joining striking workers, Unite union reps, union officials and Labour colleagues on a virtual picket line last Friday. Striking workers are still there now, as I speak. I would like, once again, to express my unwavering solidarity with those workers, who are striking to save their jobs, not just for themselves and their families, but for future generations and for their community.

4.46 pm

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): It is an honour to be called to speak in this important debate, Sir Charles. Having served in uniform for many years, I know a bit about defence procurement. I am also privileged to have used some of the best British-made equipment in the world.

In 2018-19, the Ministry of Defence spent £19.2 billion with UK industry and commerce, deliberately supporting 119,000 jobs. It is jobs that we are talking about today. In 2020, our commitment under the spending review is to spend an extra £16 billion, on top of the extra £8 billion that was promised in last year's manifesto. That is exactly what the Ministry of Defence and our defence industry have been waiting for. Keeping people safe is the primary role of Government, but it is also about providing the commitment, the certainty and the spending guarantees that allow our nascent defence industry to plan ahead, at what is now well over 2% of GDP.

In the time I have today, I want to emphasise three key things. First, we have fantastic equipment in the UK. I am confident that, in the main, our forces have what they need. Secondly, I am proud to serve under a Conservative Government that get defence. Thirdly, we

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must spend responsibly and flexibly to secure what we need and to keep our British defence industry at the forefront of R&D, and to be able to produce competitive exports.

What do we have to be proud of right now? Lightning II, the F-35B aircraft, is an advanced, fifth generation aircraft, but it is American. Typhoon is another fantastic aircraft, and almost British. The Dreadnought to come is British, and is being built in Barrow. Our Astute boats are again British and being built in Barrow. The QE2 carriers—two of them—are British. Ajax is integrated in the UK, although it is not a UK platform. Type 26 frigates are British, Type 31 frigates are British, and the fleet solid support ships are British.

That is all good so far, but there is a note of caution. The message for post-Brexit UK is that we need to export our way out of trouble. To do that, we must showcase what we make and build. When we have a UK-based product or project with export potential we must back it, even if it involves some security compromise. We must also lower production costs to make it fit for the export market. We must develop a longer-term strategy to design and build UK equipment. That will avoid often substandard commercial off-the-shelf solutions. The UK must also design with export in mind. Expensive platforms are all very well, but we need to be able to sell them to those who do not have a huge amount of money in comparison, particularly to our emerging allies. As for legacy EU competition rules, the simple answer is no.

It is time now for liberal freedom of choice in public money to be over. For example, I do not want to see Hyundai police cars in Thames valley. The point extends across the whole of government. Let us invest in our British defence industry; let us relinquish these ridiculous EU competition rules; let us plan ahead, design for export and sell ourselves out of our financial woes with the most cost-effective kit that money can buy. Above all, we must build British, buy British and sell British to put us back on the map.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair: As everyone has been so well behaved, speakers can now have five minutes.

4.50 pm

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley) on securing the debate. He listed a number of criteria for people to be here. I tick two of the boxes: as a former union national officer and as a Minister. Indeed, I have been campaigning on this issue for many years, including when I was a Minister. I think colleagues need to understand that, underlying the debate, is a deep sickness within our civil service, which disregards, and even has a contempt for, manufacturing. It is laughable that we are having a debate with the EU over state aid when the Government refused to use the powers that they already have under European regulations. Quite frankly, other countries do not have to do that.

Let us take the example of the fleet solid support ships. France and Italy have ordered ships and prescribed that they be made in their own yards, and the same is true of the Germans. They use, interestingly enough, a foreign design, but they stipulate that the ships have to be built in German yards. There should never have been a question about this. There should have been a lot of work for our shipyards that would maintain a flow of work for the supply industries and, in particular, for the steel industry. Now there has been a welcome development in that the Secretary of State, who previously said that he would be putting out the invitation to bid in the spring, told a recent hearing of the Select Committee that that would happen shortly. I hope that that means that we are bringing that work forward. The Minister will be pleased to learn that I have been drawn to take part in Defence questions next week, when I shall be pursuing this issue.

We need to press on and do what would be taken as read in other countries. Companies understand that. They understand that if they are to sell in those other countries, they have to have substantial manufacturing bases there. Here they believe they can get away without having that. Furthermore, in its assessment of contracts, the Treasury refuses to consider the 30-odd per cent. that will come back to the Treasury directly in the form of the taxes paid by the workforce.

As the hon. Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland) pointed out, the problem goes across the board and includes police cars, fire engines, trains and, recently, hydrogen buses. We are putting lots of money into green hydrogen buses, and there is a nice picture of one in Tyne and Wear that clearly shows that it was made in China. The UK and the Scottish Governments are putting a lot of money into wind turbines, but a huge amount of the work is going overseas. As I said, no one else behaves like that.

I also draw attention to and praise the document from the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions on shovel-ready defence programmes. It argues that we should do what Germany and France are doing and bring work forward. We already know that we need the kit and have already contracted for it, so we can help those companies and, in particular, their long supply chains to keep their workforce and to continue investing in equipment if we bring forward orders for equipment that we already know about. That is also important for aerospace. The civil aerospace industry is flat on its back as a result of the aviation crisis. Helping the supply chain through help to military aerospace is enormously important. As the hon. Member for Bracknell said, the issue is also important for exports. People will come to our companies and say, "If it is not good enough for the British armed forces, why do you say it is good enough for us?"

It is not just about the companies but about the apprentices who are the skilled workforce of the future and the backbone of engineering. It is about good skilled jobs, often in communities that are at the centre of the levelling-up agenda across the country. Many of the companies depend on major plants that have satellite plants around them. They have served us well for many generations. We should back them now.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): I call Kim Johnson—five minutes.

4.55 pm

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): Thank you, Sir Charles. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley) on securing this timely and important debate. I welcome the opportunity

to speak during this debate and to call on the Government to provide a multibillion pound boost to British jobs and to back British manufacturing by placing the defence orders that they have delayed over the last five years.

The UK is right now staring down the barrel of the biggest recession of any G7 country, on top of a decade of austerity and several more decades of disinvestment in manufacturing and industry in this country. We have been promised time and again that this Government will level up the economy by investing in our manufacturing sector. Protecting jobs and creating new ones will be the quickest way to get the country out of the economic crisis. Spending by the Ministry of Defence supports 119,000 jobs in the UK and nearly 4,500 apprenticeships—that is one in 220 jobs.

Strategic investment in our industrial and manufacturing infrastructure will play a vital role in ensuring that the British economy is able to weather the economic crisis resulting from the coronavirus pandemic. It will focus investment outside London and the south-east in areas that have suffered from a historic lack of investment and that are in desperate need of support to get through this crisis, particularly in the north-west.

The Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions, representing over 100,000 skilled industrial and manufacturing workers, has called for the prioritisation of nine major shovel-ready defence projects to directly safeguard nearly 13,000 jobs during the recession. This investment will benefit the wider economy, cascading into supply chains, including thousands of small businesses across the country that supply components and software. I ask the Minister to commit today to protect all north-west defence jobs and to stimulate domestic industry at a crucial turning point in our economy by bringing forward spending for defence jobs, such as the fleet solid support ship, Type 26 frigate and phase 2 of the Tempest project. Lastly, I ask the Minister to intervene to stop Rolls-Royce from offshoring to Japan, Singapore and Spain and to protect all 350 jobs at the Barnoldswick site.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): I call Jim Shannon—five minutes.

4.57 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you. I was waiting for it to drop to two minutes. Others have not attended and I will do my best, indeed, I will keep within the five minutes as instructed. I congratulate the hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley). I have been in two Westminster Hall debates with him and he always goes with good and important subjects. That there are so many Members present indicates how important it is for all of us to be here.

There have been some fantastic contributions, but I want to make a big play if I can, as hon. Members would expect, for Northern Ireland. I look forward to the Minister's response. He is always very helpful in his responses, and I look forward to what he will be able to do to encourage me and my constituents to buy British, to sell British and see that everything British is better, as the hon. Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland) said. I concur with that comment because I am as British as the hon. Gentleman and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and I want to see those benefits coming to us as well.

Defence procurement must be based on a holistic view of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, ensuring that each region's manufacturing or supply networks benefit from defence contracts. I welcome the Prime Minister and the Chancellor's commitment to the £16.5 billion spend on defence, shipbuilding, space and cyber-research and other sectors over a four period. That was a real commitment, a real shot in the arm, and we are all very pleased to see that.

Many independent aerospace manufacturers have capacity to build other products to a high standard and should be made aware of procurement opportunities. What work has been done with, for instance, Bombardier in Northern Ireland to ensure that we can take advantage of these projects as well? It is always great to read, as in the recent award of contract for 200 armoured vehicles in Telford, that the MIV—mechanised infantry vehicle—programme aims to source 60% by value of the contract from within the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. To achieve that, the team have engaged with suppliers in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Does the Minister agree that breakdowns of supply would be useful to ensure that there is a spread of British money across every part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland? I just want to ensure that we are all part of and benefit from this strategic overplay. It is good news.

The right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar) referred to apprenticeships, and I want to make a quick play for them as well. I have been on to the Minister responsible—not this Minister, by the way—and made a play for apprenticeships to be available in Northern Ireland. Bombardier offers apprenticeships, and many other companies in this sector offer opportunities. I very much concur with the comments about the need to ensure that apprenticeship opportunities through this procurement programme will be available for each and every person.

The questions put to the Secretary of State back in June still stand today. I implored him to work with colleagues in defence to ensure that Northern Ireland skills were used in defence contracts, with special reference—I say this quite unashamedly—to the second-to-none aerospace manufacturing skills in Northern Ireland. I implore the defence team to recognise and deploy the skills in Northern Ireland—and, indeed, in all regions. I am not looking to take anything away from anybody else; that would be grossly unfair. All I want to do is ensure that we get our share of the pie, so to speak, when it comes to the opportunities from the defence budget and how that is disbursed across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

I recognise the importance of defence spending and highlight the fact that availability of procurement contracts for the small independent manufacturers or suppliers could be the post-covid-19 lifeline for small and medium-sized firms. That is exactly the point that the hon. Member for Bracknell made in his contribution. It would be a very positive thing, and let us be positive about what we can do; there is positivity in where we are at this moment.

I will finish with this point. A written question from my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) showed that the MOD spends per head per year approximately £60 in Northern Ireland as opposed

[Jim Shannon]

to £850 in areas in the south of England. I will say it again: I am not taking the bread from anybody else's mouth. I am just saying: can we have a share of that for Northern Ireland? I believe that if we can do that, we all benefit in this great country of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): I call Angela Crawley to speak for five minutes.

5.2 pm

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Charles. I congratulate the hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley) on securing this important debate about defence procurement and supply chains.

This debate is set in challenging times. We not only are living through the second wave of a global pandemic but are on course to leave the single market and the customs union by the end of this year. Therefore, I want to take a slightly different approach to the debate from that taken so far and highlight the fact that this problem is faced not only by this Government but by the many Governments around the world who are grappling with the self-inflicted harm that we are potentially causing and the unnecessary damage to people's livelihoods and to our economy through Brexit.

The defence industry and those who work in that industry are not immune from the Brexit effect, and the end of the transition period is just a month away. This will undoubtedly have a damaging impact on the sector in the long term. The industry body, ADS, has reported that almost 30,000 jobs are already at risk as a result of covid-19. That will be compounded by leaving the world's largest trading bloc without a deal.

The movement of skilled labour and the collaborative spending programmes of the EU allies will be negatively impacted by the decision to leave the European Union. That is summed up frankly, with the chief executive of ADS outlining the following:

> "The UK's aerospace, defence, space and security industries will face major disruption without a deal, through delays to cross-border trade, costly administrative requirements and a new regulatory system".

Although defence supply chains are less intense, in terms of volume and complexity, than those of some commercial sectors, new processes at the borders and ports will ultimately create delays and additional logistical challenges for this sector.

Of course, much of this debate so far has rightly focused on the skills of the workforce, the essential role that that will play in the future and the significant contribution of the defence industry to the north and in Scotland. The announcement of £16.5 billion is welcome, of course, and it is necessary that that backing will go into the defence manufacturing industry as a whole as a vital means of support. We can do nothing but welcome that announcement.

As has been outlined, however, further jobs announcements by BAE, and the concerns raised by Rolls-Royce and others about the levelling-up agenda, deserve to be heard in further detail. I want to take this opportunity to highlight concerns on the Clyde about the future maritime support programme, its competition element, the potential fragmentation of contracts and the race to the bottom that could come of that. I would like the Minister to address those concerns directly.

I am conscious of time, so I will bring my speech to an end. It has been demonstrated that the lack of understanding of the strategic and logistical planning required—both for the pandemic and in the coming months with Brexit—needs to be considered in greater detail. The definition of "defence" should perhaps have been widened in this debate, to cover pandemic resilience and wider concerns with respect to climate change, but I do not have enough time to address that.

It is important that we consider the weaknesses in the defence supply chain—across many of our industries—that have been exposed by covid. We must learn the lessons of the pandemic, and whatever happens in the next few months, the UK Government must prepare for the impact of this critical economic change on the defence industry.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): The shadow Minister has 10 minutes.

5.6 pm

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Charles. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley) for securing the debate on this important issue. As has been said, it is a timely debate—I absolutely agree—and I thank everyone for taking part. A number of excellent points have been made by colleagues on both sides of the House on the value of defence procurement and its wider economic benefits. I acknowledge those comments and will make a few broader points about the importance of defence procurement and personnel to the security and prosperity of our country.

I welcome the four-year funding settlement for defence announced by the Prime Minister last month. It is a long overdue upgrade to Britain's defences after a decade of decline since 2010. The extra investment in R&D is important, not just for defence and security, but because, if managed correctly, it will have a positive multiplier effect in areas such as aerospace, maritime, higher education and the wider supply chain across the UK. I was particularly pleased to hear that, at such a difficult time for our economy, the funding is set to create 10,000 jobs a year and 40,000 jobs in total. We of course welcome that, and will hold the Government to account on it.

Labour wants to ensure that new jobs are created in all parts of the UK, which brings me to my central point. While the Prime Minister's announcement of cash was welcome, the spending review figures confirm that the £16.5 billion injection is all capital spend, with day-to-day revenue funding for defence expected to flatline at around £31.5 billion per year. That equates to a 2.4% real-terms cut through to 2024-25. Inevitably, that will mean further cuts to our armed forces and armed forces jobs. What we saw from the Prime Minister was an announcement without a strategy. Capital investment is vital and long overdue, but it is nothing without personnel and staff to support it.

Labour stands squarely behind our armed forces, including everyone from squaddies to engineers, from caterers to staff at bases. Although the Government

have made important commitments to infrastructure, the Ministry of Defence seems to have a blind spot for staff and service personnel. After the last defence review in 2015, the Government fudged the funding figures with efficiency savings and invest-to-saves, opening up a £13 billion budget black hole. They failed to recruit the troops that the UK needs, leaving the military 1,200 troops short of strength.

As we heard earlier, there is also continued concern about the splitting up of service contracts at our bases—the ongoing dispute at Her Majesty's Naval Base, Clyde is an example. Over the last few years, some services have been subcontracted, leading to a downgrade in terms and conditions. Cleaners transferred from Babcock to ISS, for example, have seen their pensions decline and their sick pay reduced. Managed incorrectly, those contracts pit team members against each other and begin a race to the bottom on standards and working conditions for staff who are indispensable for day-to-day defence and security operations. When the Minister responds, I shall be keen to hear what he can do to reassure workers at Her Majesty's Naval Base, Clyde.

The Clyde example is particularly important because, of course, Faslane is home to the continuous at-sea nuclear deterrent—an essential part of our nation's defence infrastructure. I was fortunate enough to visit HMS Astute while she was alongside at Faslane in 2018, where we saw the expertise and dedication of service personnel aboard. It was during the week that Carillion collapsed, and as such was particularly instructive about the perils of mismanaging Government service contracts and the devastating impact this can have on vital services. Ministers must avoid the mistakes of the past, and place service personnel at the heart of defence and security operations. They must also use their significant buying power to drive up standards, and reinforce the high standards and working conditions that our personnel's service and expertise deserve.

More broadly, this Government have an important opportunity to use defence procurement as a powerful lever to unleash prosperity in every region and every nation of the UK, including many areas that the Government claim they would like to level up. As ADS Group notes, the UK defence industry had a turnover of £22.7 billion in 2019, and directly supported 132,000 jobs, including 5,000 apprentices. Sadly, for five years Ministers dragged their feet on whether the Royal Fleet Auxiliary's new fleet solid support ships would be built, as my hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead has pointed out and my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar) tirelessly campaigns on and has reminded us of today.

There are concerns that the MOD may still accept bids from consortiums, including—even led by—foreign companies. As I have said previously, there are enormous benefits to rewarding defence contracts to British companies, outside of the obvious security benefits. From the revenue generated for the Exchequer to the higher national insurance contributions, building British is a no-brainer, so I say to the Government that what can be built in Britain must be built in Britain. The defence and security industrial strategy must also involve plans to develop the UK's future capability to build in Britain. This will be one of the tests by which we will judge the Government's long-awaited integrated review.

I have several asks of the Minister, and would be grateful if he could provide some clarity on these issues. First, when will the Government publish the defence and security industrial strategy and the associated integrated review? Will the new defence and security industrial strategy place the rights of staff, who are indispensable to day-to-day defence and security operations, at the very centre of Government procurement, or will it continue the trend of undercutting them, threatening to undermine the operation of vital defence and security assets? Finally, will the strategy make an unambiguous commitment to spending on, and building, all platforms and assets in the UK to help built British jobs? I look forward to the response from the Minister.

Today, we have heard a positive consensus from all sides about the new funding. Ministers must now make sure that they put that new money to best use. They must close the £13 billion black hole in the defence budget, recruit and properly value our service personnel, and build new military equipment here in Britain.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): Due to a rash of good behaviour, the Minister has acres of time in which to expand an argument and answer questions. However, would he please leave Mr Whitley two minutes at the end to wind up in his own way?

5.13 pm

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Jeremy Quin): I welcome this important debate, and congratulate the hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley) on having secured it. This debate is particularly timely, as several hon. Members have reminded us, as it comes in the wake of an extremely positive bit of news. It is wonderful to see the Chamber united, with the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan) welcoming last week's announcement. Even my friends from the Scottish National party have welcomed this investment in the defence of the United Kingdom, and I welcome the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) having done so. It is a £24 billion increase and, as has been suggested, that is a massive boost to the defence of the United Kingdom. It is the largest investment in 30 years—the largest since the end of the cold war—and I am so pleased that it has generated support in this Chamber this afternoon.

This is a timely debate not only because of that announcement, but because it comes at a point when "team defence" has done so much and performed so brilliantly in confronting the coronavirus pandemic. I begin by thanking the defence industry at every level for its positive and collaborative response to this once-in-a-hundred-years event.

At the heart of defence is a critical task of delivering equipment and support to our armed forces to enable them to continue their vital work. We were reminded of that by my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland), who served himself—it is the kit that our people need to do the job that they are called upon to do. Our partners in industry have risen to that challenge. They have done just that in providing support throughout the pandemic.

To assist them, the Department has actively supported the defence sector through the use of prepayments to maintain business continuity. Some £138 million has

[Jeremy Quin]

been paid on this basis to maintain that flow of cash right through the sector. That has been alongside our drumbeat of orders. I was grateful to hear the hon. Member for Neath (Christina Rees) mention the munitions contract with BAE. I hope that will benefit those employees. It is one of a number of contracts throughout Wales and the rest of the United Kingdom that have continued to be delivered through the course of this pandemic.

Just as we have been monitoring the health of 600 of our suppliers, we make clear to the clients their responsibility to actively engage and support the supply chain. We have engaged directly with ADS, which has been referred to, and with other trade bodies and it has been good to hear of the productive relationships that companies have enjoyed in supporting each other during this period.

As hon. Members have mentioned, the way in which the workforce has been throughout this has been particularly positive. I thank them for how they have adopted and adapted to necessarily different working practices to continue to supply our defence forces, pulling together in a common endeavour to support our forces. How everyone has stepped up to deliver this has been extremely welcome.

Grahame Morris: The Minister's rhetoric is excellent, but in terms of the practicalities for fleet solid support ships, for Rolls-Royce, and the supply chain and the lift fan blades for the STOL—short takeoff and landing—engines for the F-35 Lightning fighter, will the Minister recognise the important role of Government in giving direction to companies such as Rolls-Royce to ensure that that work is carried out here in the United Kingdom? It is part of our sovereign defence plan to ensure that we have security of supply over these vital components.

Jeremy Quin: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I recognise the passion with which he addresses the issue of the Rolls-Royce concerns at Barnoldswick and the current action there. I hope that can be brought to a conclusion. I know my colleagues have said much the same. I am not aware of any long-term plans to remove the F-35 components from outside the United Kingdom. I am not aware of them and I hope we can continue and maintain a productive relationship with Rolls-Royce.

We all know what a dreadful situation is confronted by the aerospace industry in general. In practice, in defence, we continue to invest and provide that lifeblood of support to our companies that I hope will enable them to remain and prosper inside the UK. I will come on to the FSS point made by the hon. Gentleman later in my remarks.

The proposer of this debate, the hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley), mentioned Cammell Laird, which is in his constituency, and I congratulate the company on its work through the pandemic. It has done sterling work on the Type 45 power improvement programme, and it is great to see HMS Dauntless re-floated with key equipment installed and back on to trials. The company has also been working with the Royal Fleet Auxiliary—currently RFA Wave Knight and RFA Tidesurge. With them, and the work of other companies in the marine sector, Birkenhead continues to provide invaluable contributions to the defence and the UK's wider prosperity.

More broadly, the north-west has one of the highest per capita defence equipment spends of any region in the country. These figures might upset the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). The spend is £270 per head per year in the north-west, some way behind Scotland and indeed, Wales, but way ahead of Northern Ireland. The hon. Member for Strangford is absolutely right that we need to lift up and level up the economy.

Jim Shannon: We have an excellent MOD contractor in Thales in Belfast, which I know the Minister is aware of. It is very much involved in cyber-security. I encourage the Minister, when looking towards cyber-security contracts and procurement for the future, to note that Thales could perhaps very much feature in that.

Jeremy Quin: I have the gift of foresight. Only very recently, I was on a call with the First Minister of Northern Ireland with Northern Ireland defence contractors, talking about the opportunities that may come up. I know that the Chief of the Air Staff will be in the Province to talk about opportunities in aerospace, and we are minded to see how we can support all parts of the United Kingdom, absolutely including Northern Ireland.

To go back to the north-west, the Typhoon programme makes a significant contribution to the UK economy, generating billions of pounds through exports. That is an important issue, which my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Bracknell raised. That will be enhanced not only by the recent radar development, which has secured in excess of 600 jobs, including 120 jobs at BAE Systems Warton in Lancashire, but also by the recently signed Quadriga contract, which secures further skilled manufacturing work to build parts of 38 new aircraft at BAE Systems Samlesbury, including engineering roles that are central to the UK's future combat air ambitions.

We can be positive about the future for defence across the UK. The four-year settlement provides the financial certainty needed to pursue a radical modernisation programme to meet today's threats and prepare for the future.

I urge the hon. Member for Portsmouth South to be a little patient. We have the funding envelope and we are looking forward to producing the integrated review and the defence and security industrial strategy. These are three important parts of the stool that will take us forward for the next few years. It is a platform for the future. I recognise the hon. Member's eagerness to see those things announced. I would ask him to be patient a little longer. He is obviously happy with the first part of the stool—we have the other two legs to produce, and I hope to bring them forward as soon as practical. As he appreciates, these are cross-Government reports. We will bring them forward when we can.

The four-year settlement ensures that the armed forces will be able to adapt to the threat with cutting-edge technology, compete effectively in the information age and fight decisively when required. It will position the UK as a global leader in the new domains of cyber and space and transform the UK's capabilities across sea, land and air.

As has been stated, it is underpinned by record investment of at least £6.6 billion on military research and development. I hope to encourage the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson), who is keen to see us committing

to programmes. The announcement that the Prime Minister made confirmed our order of eight Type 26 and five Type 35 frigates.[1] It also supports a subject close to the heart of a number of people in this Chamber—the future of the fleet solid support ship programme, which will supply our carrier strike group, and which I know is of direct interest to the right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar), as it is to the hon. Member for Birkenhead, among many Members. That is an ongoing process, as the right hon. Member for Warley knows; I look forward to his Defence question next week. The competition will be launched next year. I was going to say in the spring, which is but a short step away. We are looking forward to spring dawning.

John Spellar: Will the Minister give way?

Jeremy Quin: I give way to the right hon. Gentleman, as I thought I might have to.

John Spellar: This is absurd. We know what the requirement is. It has already been out to one tender. The only argument was about whether it was a warship. Why are the Government still dithering? Why do they not get the order there, let companies bid in and let their suppliers know and start tooling up and getting supply chains working? Why can they not get a move on?

Jeremy Quin: The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that these are warships, which I know he regards as a great step forward in our thinking, as we have learned more about how they will operate in the carrier strike group. He will just have to be a little more patient. We are getting on with the procurement. Come the spring, he will see that competition launched.

John Spellar: Why the delay? Quite frankly, they could always have been designated as warships, because they always had guns on them. What is holding it up now?

Jeremy Quin: First of all, we have had a delay in this programme for quite some time—I do not know if it goes quite back as far as the previous Administration, but it might well have done. For a long period, people have been thinking about the FSS and how exactly it should be incorporated. All I can say is that I am delighted that, very soon, the right hon. Gentleman's pain will be over, with the competition being launched. I am pleased that we have reached that point. It is critical, as the right hon. Gentleman will agree, that the next competition is extremely well founded, well based and successful, and we are putting in place the basis to ensure that that is the case.

I must move on. Another major project of direct importance is the future combat air system, which is a truly strategic endeavour. It will build on the success of Typhoon and F-35 to again promote great jobs in engineering in our high engineering base in the north-west of England and throughout the UK. On land, our exciting £2.8 billion commitments to Boxer at Telford is now feeding through supply chain orders throughout the sector. All these programmes, whether at the cutting edge of maritime combat, air or land capabilities, support jobs not only at tier 1, but throughout the supply chain, as has been said, with 119,000 directly employed and a further 80,000 or so employed through the defence supply chain. While decisions on the allocation of funding across the breadth of our capabilities will be made and announced in due course, this settlement will support skills and jobs, and apprenticeships, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (Simon Fell), throughout the UK.

In order to ensure a strategic approach, I announced earlier this year that we are leading a cross-Government review of the UK's defence and security sectors. It will identify how we can ensure that we have competitive, innovative and world-class defence and security industries that drive research and investment. We recently launched the social value in procurement model, which, to the hon. Member for Portsmouth South's point, will provide another tool to ensure our major procurement projects evaluate priority social value themes and outcomes linked to prosperity. As part of the defence prosperity programme, we are working with industry and Government colleagues to develop a joint economic data hub within the UK Defence Solutions Centre to collect and aggregate economic data from across the sector. It will provide a better understanding of the economic contribution of the defence sector at a UK, national and regional level that can inform our decision-making process.

Throughout defence, we are committed to ensuring that we seize the opportunities provided by smaller companies. We are targeting a 25% spend with such companies. We have already hit 19%, up from 13% a couple of years prior to that. We are extremely mindful of the need to maintain a clear vision of our supply chain, and we are working through a Department-wide supply chain resilience and risk programme. Defence has some of the most complex supply chains and challenging procurement programmes across government. However, they contribute to the UK's proud history of providing the skills, capabilities and equipment that keeps us and our allies safe, and I am convinced that, given the Government's commitment, the UK will have an equally proud future.

Sir Charles Walker (in the Chair): Mr Whitley, can you sum up this excellent debate, please?

5.28 pm

Mick Whitley: I thank all hon. Members for their contributions, which have been fantastic. The debate has greatly benefited from the depth of their experience, insight and expertise. I am glad that we have achieved consensus on the important role that defence procurement has to play in supporting domestic industry, and I look forward to continuing this conversation in the weeks and months ahead. I especially thank the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan), and the Minister for giving up their time to contribute. As I said before, I hope that this is an issue on which we can collaborate in the future. I also thank you very much, Sir Charles.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered defence procurement and supply chains.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

1. *[Official Report, 7 December 2020, Vol. 685, c. 6MC.]*

Written Statements

Tuesday 1 December 2020

CABINET OFFICE

Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 (Repeal) Bill

The Minister for the Constitution and Devolution (Chloe Smith): Today, the Government publish in draft the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 (Repeal) Bill, which is required to repeal the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 (FTPA), and in doing so revive the prerogative power to dissolve Parliament.

The Bill makes express provision that the dissolution prerogative is to be revived to ensure legal, constitutional and political certainty around the process for dissolving Parliament. There will be an ouster clause in the Bill to reinforce the long-standing position that the exercise of the dissolution prerogative is not reviewable by the courts.

The Bill retains certain aspects of the FTPA to ensure the continued operability of our electoral system. The Bill does not change the 25 working day period between dissolution and polling day. The Bill also contains provision to fix the maximum length of a Parliament at five years, thereby returning to the pre-FTPA position.

There will also be provision made in the Bill to give the Prime Minister the discretion, within clearly defined limits, to set a new polling day in the event of the demise of the Crown. Under section 20 of the Representation of the People Act 1985, in the event of the demise of the Crown after a proclamation summoning a new Parliament, polling day is postponed by a fortnight. The 1985 Act provides no discretion or flexibility to further alter the date of the poll and had demise occurred after the dissolution of Parliament for the 2019 election the polling day would have been postponed to 27 December, the day after Boxing day. In these very unlikely circumstances, the Prime Minister has the discretion to move the polling day up to seven days either side of this default 14-day postponement.

I am also depositing in the Libraries of both Houses a draft document setting out the Government's initial thinking on the non-legislative constitutional principles that will need to underpin the exercise of the prerogative powers to dissolve Parliament. The Government would welcome the Joint Committee and other parliamentary Select Committees giving consideration to these underpinning conventions.

The FTPA was a departure from the long-term constitutional norm, whereby the Prime Minister could seek an early dissolution of Parliament. It was passed with limited scrutiny, and created parliamentary paralysis at a critical time for our country. This Bill, in returning our constitutional system to the pre-FTPA status quo ante, will enable the Government, within the life of a Parliament, to call a general election at the time of their choosing, and allow the people to decide on their Government.

It is vital that this important part of our constitutional settlement is given careful consideration and we welcome the forthcoming scrutiny of the draft Bill to ensure that what replaces the FTPA is subject to greater scrutiny.

Attachments can be viewed online at: https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2020-12-01/HCWS615

[HCWS615]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Proceeds of Crime Act 2002: Codes of Practice Consultation

The Minister for Security (James Brokenshire): I intend to lay legislation in 2021 which will commence the Criminal Finances Act 2017 in Northern Ireland. As part of this, I will issue updated codes of practice under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002.

The Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 contains a comprehensive package of measures designed to make the recovery of unlawfully held assets more effective. The operation of certain powers within POCA are subject to guidance in various codes of practice issued by the Home Secretary, the Attorney General and the Advocate General for Northern Ireland, the Department of Justice and Scottish Ministers.

The existing codes of practice need to be updated to reflect my intention to commence the Criminal Finances Act in Northern Ireland, following consent from the Justice Minister, Naomi Long. The changes to the codes will not come in to force until the Criminal Finances Act has come in to force in Northern Ireland.

The Proceeds of Crime Act provides that before a revised code of practice is issued, I must consider any representations made and modify the codes as appropriate, and subsequently lay the codes before Parliament for approval. As such, I will launch a consultation today, 1 December, for eight weeks.

I intend to consult on changes to the following codes of practice:

> The investigation code of practice issued under section 377 of the Proceeds of Crime Act, which provides guidance for investigators in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.
>
> The search, seizure and detention of property code of practice issued under section 195S of the Proceeds of Crime Act, which provides guidance in relation to certain reserved functions in Northern Ireland.
>
> The recovery of cash: search powers codes of practice issued under section 292 of the Proceeds of Crime Act, which provides guidance for investigators in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.
>
> The recovery of listed assets: search powers codes of practice issued under section 303G of the Proceeds of Crime Act, which provides guidance for investigators in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The Attorney General will also consult on changes to the investigation code of practice issued under section 377A of the Proceeds of Crime Act, which provides guidance for prosecutors in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

I will arrange for a copy of the consultation documents to be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS613]

UK Points-based Immigration System

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Kevin Foster): I am pleased to confirm the Government have today launched a number of immigration routes under the new UK points-based system, including the skilled worker route. This is a significant milestone and delivers on this Government's commitment to take back control of our borders by ending freedom of movement with the EU and replacing it with a global points-based system.

The Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Act 2020, which received Royal Assent on 11 November, ends free movement on 31 December 2020 and paves the way for our new points-based system that treats EU and non-EU nationals equally.

Applicants for the new routes can now start to apply under the points-based system. EEA nationals who arrive in the UK before 31 December 2020 remain eligible for the EU settlement scheme. Over 4.2 million have already applied and others have until 30 June 2021 to do so.

The points-based system will work in the interests of the whole of our United Kingdom and prioritise the skills a person has to offer, not where their passport comes from. It will ensure we attract the brightest and best talent we need to contribute to our economy, our communities and our public services. It also forms a critical part of this country's economic recovery by ensuring investment in the UK domestic workforce and helping us to create a high-wage, high-skill, high-productivity economy is the focus of employer's recruitment activities.

Today's launch builds on the successful opening of the reformed global talent route in February, the health and care visa in August and the student and child student routes in October. In addition, as the Chancellor set out in the spending review last week, we are supporting the delivery of the new borders and immigration system with an additional £217 million of funding.

Ending free movement and introducing the points-based system is the first phase of our plans to transform the operation of our borders and immigration system. Additional routes will be opened in the coming months and our longer-term plans will further simplify, enable and digitise our systems to put customers at the heart of a firmer, fairer and easier to navigate borders and immigration system.

[HCWS614]

TRANSPORT

Crossrail: Additional Funding

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): Today, we are announcing that £825 million of additional borrowing will be made available to the Greater London Authority (GLA) for the purposes of Crossrail. The GLA intend to repay this loan via London's business rate supplement and from the mayoral community infrastructure levy. This agreement will ensure that the project continues to be funded.

The Government remain committed to the rapid completion of the project, in a way that is fair to UK taxpayers, and have committed to financing the completion of Crossrail. However, London—as the primary beneficiary—must ultimately bear any additional costs. Crossrail Ltd is committed to reducing its funding shortfall, and will take all necessary steps to complete the project without requiring further additional funding. TfL is ensuring that further independent analysis of costs are carried out.

[HCWS612]

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