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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 12 January 2021

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Virtual participation in proceedings commenced (Orders, 4 June and 30 December 2020).

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

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Covid-19: Vaccine Roll-out

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): What progress his Department has made on rolling out covid-19 vaccines. [910579]

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What progress his Department has made on rolling out covid-19 vaccines. [910582]

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): What progress his Department has made on rolling out covid-19 vaccines. [910586]

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the progress of the covid-19 vaccination programme. [910591]

Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con): What progress his Department has made on rolling out covid-19 vaccines. [910592]

Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con): What progress his Department has made on rolling out covid-19 vaccines. [910594]

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): What progress his Department has made on rolling out covid-19 vaccines. [910595]

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): What progress his Department has made on rolling out covid-19 vaccines. [910601]

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): What progress his Department has made in rolling out covid-19 vaccinations. [910604]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): I am proud that the NHS began vaccinating patients against covid-19 on 8 December, at the start of the biggest immunisation programme in British history. I am delighted to tell the House that more than 2.3 million people in the UK have now received the first dose of their covid-19 vaccine. Over the coming weeks and months, the rate of vaccination will increase as more doses become available and the vaccination programme continues to expand.

Jason McCartney [V]: Thousands of elderly and vulnerable people across Kirklees have already been vaccinated, but some of my constituents are rightly worried that they may have to travel to large vaccination centres in other parts of the country to get their jabs. Will the Secretary of State please confirm that all my constituents will be able to get their jabs locally? When will the new vaccination centre at Huddersfield's John Smith's stadium be opening?

Matt Hancock: Everybody will be able to get a jab locally. We are committed to ensuring that across England a local vaccination centre will be available within 10 miles of where everyone lives. For the vast majority of people—over 95%—this will be a fixed, permanent site. For some of the most rural parts—more rural than my hon. Friend's constituency—there will be mobile units. If people get called to a mass vaccination centre and they feel it is too far for them to travel, they will be able to get a vaccine locally through one of the local GP services. I am delighted that the centre at the John Smith's stadium in Huddersfield is going to be opening in the next couple of weeks.

John Lamont: I very much welcome the great work by my Government colleagues to secure the vaccine supplies for all parts of the United Kingdom and the amazing work of NHS staff to ensure that the vaccines are being delivered into people's arms as quickly as possible. Will the Secretary of State tell the House how many vaccines have been delivered by the UK Government for use in Scotland?

Matt Hancock: We distribute the vaccine supplies that are available according to population, so it is based on the Barnett formula. In Scotland, of course, the Scottish NHS is delivering. A fair population share of vaccine is available to the Scottish NHS—that is available right now, so the stocks are there—and then it is for the NHS in Scotland to do the vital work of making sure that each and every one of those jabs gets into somebody's arm and helps to protect lives.

Julian Sturdy [V]: The vaccination programme in York is making encouraging progress, with the first doses of the Oxford vaccine having arrived last week and Askham Bar and Haxby centres delivering injections in line with the priority list, which is fantastic news. However, can the Secretary of State reassure me that every care is being taken to ensure that smaller GP practices in rural areas are in no way disadvantaged in scheduling their patients for vaccination relative to the larger urban practices?

Matt Hancock: Yes, of course. Small or large, rural or urban, we need GPs to be vaccinating right across the country, and that is what is happening. We are organising it through what are called primary care networks, which are groups of GPs that cover between 30,000 and 50,000 patients. The reason we are doing that is so that each of a group of GP practices can contribute some staff to the vaccination team so that they can carry on with the other vital work that they are doing. The networks are of course larger in more sparsely populated parts of the country such as North Yorkshire, but nevertheless we have put in place the commitment to everybody having a vaccination centre within 10 miles of where they live, to make sure that we reach all parts.

Stephen Morgan: There is welcome news that St James' Hospital in my constituency is to become a vaccination centre, and constituents are eager to see it up and running. Will the Secretary of State confirm when the hard-working staff and volunteers on the ground will receive the doses and equipment that they need to open the centre?

Matt Hancock: I am really delighted to highlight that news and I am also glad that, as the hon. Gentleman has just demonstrated, this is a national effort that we can all play our part in. The cross-party support that we and the NHS have received for the vaccination effort is incredibly welcome, and I know that the NHS team on the ground will really appreciate the hon. Gentleman's support. The kit will be delivered on time—over 98% of vaccines have been delivered on time. Of course, in a very large logistical exercise there is always the occasional hiccup, but I will get back to the hon. Gentleman and make sure that the Minister for covid vaccine deployment, my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), gets back to him with the precise details of when the kit will arrive at his local hospital.

Ben Everitt: It is fantastic news that 2.3 million people across the whole of the UK have already received the first dose of this vaccine. Businesses and venues across Milton Keynes are queuing up to offer their support for the vaccination programme, including the wonderful ECG Training, where I went for a covid test last week—I passed by the way, Mr Speaker. Can the Secretary of State tell us what the plan is for accepting these kind offers of help and support with the vaccination programme?

Matt Hancock: I am really delighted that ECG Training is involved in hosting some of the testing centres. We have had amazing offers of support in the form of places that are now being used as testing centres and as some of the 1,000-plus vaccination centres across the country. We have been working since the summer with some sites to ensure that they were ready to be vaccination centres. We are always open to further offers of support, but I would say that we have been working on this for some time. It is also important that, for infection control reasons, testing centres and vaccine sites that are put in the same place are kept separate, not least because we want to make sure that when an octogenarian goes for a vaccine, they are kept safe in the process of getting that vaccine. The thing to do is raise this specific offer of support with the Minister responsible for vaccine deployment, my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon.

Holly Mumby-Croft [V]: I thank my right hon. Friend for his help in getting the vaccine into our Ironstone Centre, Scunthorpe Hospital, and, I am really pleased to say, some of our care homes, too. Can he tell us how the new Oxford vaccine will speed up access to the jab for those still waiting and what that means for towns and villages in my area, such as Hibaldstow, Scawby, Kirton in Lindsey, and Messingham? Will they see more local vaccination centres?

Matt Hancock: It is so important to get the vaccine to care homes. Over a quarter of care home residents have now received their first dose of the vaccine, and the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine is much easier to get to care homes. We will be doing that by taking the vaccine to the care home rather than opening new centres, but I

want people in Hibaldstow, Scawby, Kirton in Lindsey, Messingham and throughout the Scunthorpe constituency to know that they will be within 10 miles of a vaccination centre, because we know how important it is that everybody can access this vaccine.

Andrew Percy [V]: May I also thank the five GP vaccination centres serving my constituency in Brigg, Goole, Owston Ferry, Scunthorpe and Barton? They are doing a cracking job at getting this vaccine out. As we move from phase 1 into phase 2, the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation has advised that we can start looking at particular occupations. May I ask the Secretary of State to bear in mind shop workers who have had to work throughout this pandemic, including at the beginning, without any protection, and who deal with hundreds of people every day? Can we make sure that they are prioritised, as we move from phase 1 into phase 2?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I want to thank shop workers in essential shops who have to be there for all of us, even in these difficult times when the virus is widely spread. We will be looking very carefully at those professions that will need to be prioritised in phase 2 of the prioritisation programme. We will look at teachers, police and others, but we will also look at shop workers and will make those decisions based on the data.

Robbie Moore: I commend my right hon. Friend for what he is doing in terms of the vaccine roll-out. Across West Yorkshire, we have four large-scale vaccination centres planned, but that means that we have one in the Bradford district. May I put in a plea to have a large-scale vaccination centre in Keighley? Can we also consider as vaccination centres smaller-scale offerings that are coming forward from places such as Ilkley Rugby Club?

Matt Hancock: I will absolutely look at those two suggestions. I also remind my hon. Friend, all of his constituents and all those across the Bradford district that, yes, there are the large-scale vaccination centres, but there is also the primary care-based delivery, which is happening right across the country.

Munira Wilson [V]: It has been reported that Pinnacle, the IT system being used to organise the vaccinations, is already struggling to cope with heavy usage. My local GP vaccination hub, which I visited on Friday, reported that it was being slow, and there have also been worrying reports about very elderly people having to queue for a long time outdoors while staff try to get the IT system working. Will the Secretary of State please confirm what action the Department is taking to ensure that the systems work more efficiently, and will be able to cope as the number of vaccination sites grows?

Matt Hancock: Clearly, the IT underpinnings of this project are critical. The Pinnacle system is working well, but we are constantly monitoring it to make sure that it supports the roll-out of the vaccine.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): Our sense of encouragement at the roll-out of the vaccine is tempered by our deep alarm at the situation we are in. Over 80,000 people have died. On current trends, we are likely to see more deaths in this wave than we saw in the first. Millions still have to go to work and the virus is now more infectious. Those still going to

work of course include NHS staff, and the British Medical Association says that 46,000 of them are off sick with covid. Can the Secretary of State go further and faster, and ensure that frontline NHS staff receive the vaccination in the next two weeks? Will he provide daily updates on the numbers of NHS staff who have been vaccinated?

Matt Hancock: We do now provide daily statistics on the roll-out of the vaccine, and we will provide more data as the system matures and the roll-out advances. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise the challenges that the NHS is facing today. Although the roll-out of the vaccine is proceeding well and we are on track to hit the targets that we have set, we must also stress to everybody the importance of following the rules that are in place to control this virus and reduce the pressures on the NHS, which are very considerable at this moment.

Jonathan Ashworth: We all understand that, until vaccination is rolled out more generally, we will continue to see hospitalisations. The NHS is currently in a crisis: beds are filling up; intensive care unit surge capacity is being maxed out; ambulances are backed up outside hospitals; and there are warnings about oxygen supplies. Hospitals were not built for these demands on oxygen, so can the Secretary of State assure us that there are contingencies in place, and can he guarantee that no hospital will run out of oxygen in the coming weeks?

Matt Hancock: There are very significant pressures on the NHS. On the specific question about oxygen supplies, the limitation is not the supply of oxygen itself; it is the ability to get the oxygen through the physical oxygen supply systems in hospitals. That essentially becomes a constraint on an individual hospital's ability to take more covid patients, because the supply of oxygen is obviously central to the treatment of people with covid in hospital. As we have a national health service, if a hospital cannot put more pressure on its oxygen system, we take people to a different hospital. I assure the hon. Gentleman that there is no constraint that we are anywhere near on the national availability of oxygen—oxygenated beds. As he knows and as we have seen reported, sometimes patients have to be moved to a different location—as local as possible, but occasionally across the country—to ensure that they get the treatment that they need.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP) [V]: Yesterday, the Secretary of State revealed that only a quarter of care home residents in England had been vaccinated against covid, despite being the No. 1 priority group. Can he explain why they were not the first cohort to receive the Pfizer vaccine in December, as was the case in Scotland?

Matt Hancock: That is not quite right. I am glad to report that care home residents have been receiving the Pfizer jab. That is harder—logistically more difficult. Looking at the total roll-out of the programme, I am delighted that, as the hon. Lady says, over a quarter of people who are residents in care homes are now able to get the jab, and that number is rising sharply.

Mr Speaker: We return to Dr Whitford. *[Interruption.]* Dr Whitford's second question has disappeared, so we will move on.

Covid-19: Cancer Diagnosis and Treatment

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of the second wave of covid-19 on cancer (a) diagnosis and (b) treatment delayed during the covid-19 outbreak. [910580]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jo Churchill): First, I am sure the whole House will want to join me in sending our best wishes to my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire) and his family for his treatment. We look forward to seeing him back in this place in due course.

The NHS has been clear since the beginning of the pandemic that the continuation of urgent cancer treatment must be a priority. Latest data showed urgent cancer referrals continuing to increase, with nearly 88% of all patients seeing a specialist within two weeks of referral and nearly 96% of patients receiving treatment within 31 days of a decision to treat. However, I must caveat that by saying that the context for this data was before the recent rise in coronavirus cases. The NHS is open. It is hugely important that any person worried about any symptom comes forward and knows that care is there.

Navendu Mishra [V]: I would like to associate myself with the comments regarding the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire) and I wish him a speedy recovery.

I too want to thank the hard-working colleagues in the NHS who are doing everything they can to ensure that cancer care and treatment can continue. However, unfortunately, due to the unprecedented demand on ICU capacity caused by the pandemic, an increasing number of urgent priority 2 cancer surgeries have been cancelled. Can the Minister assure me that everything is being done to work with the Treasury to increase capacity available to the NHS by continuing to commission the independent sector to ensure that urgent care and treatment can continue so that cancer does not become the forgotten “c” in this crisis?

Jo Churchill: I can unreservedly say yes to that. The NHS is under huge pressure and there have been some instances where, for totally understandable and unavoidable reasons such as staff ICU capacity or the safety of patients themselves, treatment has been rescheduled. Any such decisions are always made as a last resort. However, we have changed the way we operate, making sure that we have covid-secure cancer hubs, consolidated surgery and centralised triage to prioritise those patients whose need is most urgent. We have utilised the independent sector, and will continue to do so, to increase capacity. These measures, and, as the hon. Member said, the tremendous efforts of our NHS cancer workforce and their teams, are helping to ensure that those who need treatment can have it continue without delay.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Throughout the pandemic we have been calling for a cancer recovery plan, so we were glad to see one published in December, but disappointed that it ran only for a couple of months. Events have clearly overtaken us since that publication, and the unprecedented demand on our NHS risks further delays to treatment and to people entering the system for treatment. These plans must now go much, much further. Will the Minister

make a commitment today to work with the sector and interested parliamentarians to develop the recovery plan into one that properly addresses the backlog and builds improved treatment pathways for the future?

Jo Churchill: The cancer services recovery plan was worked on by clinicians and stakeholders, including the charities, to make sure that we had a robust plan for addressing the challenges that have come about throughout the pandemic. The levels remain high for referral and treatment, despite other pressures on the NHS. I assure the hon. Gentleman that I regularly meet Cally Palmer and Professor Peter Johnson, who lead for the NHS in this area. We have made it absolutely clear, since the beginning of the pandemic, that the continuation of urgent cancer treatment is a priority, as is its restoration. We are doing what we can to ensure that swift treatment is there for everybody. I regularly meet all-party parliamentary groups—indeed, I am meeting one on Thursday of this week—so I can assure the hon. Gentleman on that front.

Mr Speaker: We are going back to Scotland for the second question from Dr Whitford, to be answered by the Secretary of State.

Dr Whitford [V]: As the Secretary of State highlighted earlier, primary care networks will play a major role in rolling out the vaccine in England, but we have heard previously from MPs that not all areas are covered by such networks. How does he plan to avoid a postcode lottery and ensure equitable access, with outreach into vulnerable ethnic or deprived communities?

Matt Hancock: Some 99% of GP surgeries are members of primary care networks. The very small minority that are not are being dealt with to ensure that we have fair access to vaccines, and they will of course be covered by invitations to the large vaccination sites as well.

I agree strongly with the hon. Lady that it is vital that we reach into and support those communities who may be more distant and harder to reach both geographically and, in some cases, culturally. The NHS is very well placed to do that and is one of the most trusted public services in encouraging those from all backgrounds to take the jab. Pharmacists, too, will play a vital role in the outreach programme.

Covid-19: Community Testing

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): What progress his Department has made on rolling out community testing for covid-19. [910581]

Mrs Heather Wheeler (South Derbyshire) (Con): What progress his Department has made on rolling out community testing for covid-19. [910585]

Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con): What progress his Department has made on rolling out community testing for covid-19. [910588]

The Minister for Care (Helen Whately): Community asymptomatic testing is an important tool in the fight against covid-19. We have delivered more than 5 million lateral flow tests to the 117 local authorities that have already gone live with testing their communities, and we

are rapidly expanding the programme to all remaining local authorities in England, as well as working with devolved Administrations on their plans.

Alexander Stafford [V]: Ninety-four-year-old Tom Drury-Smith from Todwick was the first to receive the vaccine in Rother Valley at the Anston medical centre, thanks to the amazing work of the Rotherham CCG and the primary care network. Does my hon. Friend agree that the key to both community testing and vaccine uptake is to ensure that people do not have to travel far to access centres, especially those who are older and do not have access to cars? Can she assure me and others that vaccine centres and community testing centres will be sited as appropriately as possible, including in Rother valley areas such as Swallowneast and Maltby?

Helen Whately: It is great to hear about the work of the Rotherham CCG and my hon. Friend's primary care network, which are clearly on the front foot in this vital work of vaccinating people who are at high risk in his community. As he may have heard from the Secretary of State earlier, we are making sure that everybody is able to access community testing as they need it and has a vaccination centre within reach.

Mrs Wheeler [V]: Will the Minister join me in welcoming the opening of community testing centres around Swadlincote in recent weeks, paving the way for greater testing capability and coverage right across Derbyshire? Will she also confirm that the rapid lateral flow tests being used are accurate and reliable and are an important tool in tackling asymptomatic transmission of the covid virus?

Helen Whately: I join my hon. Friend in welcoming the opening of community testing centres in Swadlincote. Asymptomatic testing enables us to pick up cases in high prevalence areas that otherwise would go undetected, which means that we can break chains of transmission. There has been extensive clinical evaluation from Public Health England and Oxford University, which shows that lateral flow tests are appropriate for that use. They identify over two thirds of all people who have covid-19 but often do not have symptoms and, importantly, they catch the vast majority with a high viral load.

Karl McCartney [V]: What can be done to provide schoolteachers in Lincoln and across the country with readily available rapid lateral flow antigen tests, to enable them to carry on teaching, schools to stay open and maybe exams to be taken?

Helen Whately: I can assure my hon. Friend that most secondary schools and colleges have already set up testing sites and have begun weekly testing, using lateral flow devices for staff currently in school. Staff could also participate in daily contact testing on site, and primary schools will shortly be receiving test kits for weekly staff testing and also for daily contact testing.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): We can have all the testing in the world, but it will not be effective if people do not self-isolate after a positive result. We have repeatedly said that compliance with self-isolation rules is not good enough; with only one in eight people qualifying for the self-isolation payment, that is not surprising. Can the Minister ensure that everyone is properly supported to self-isolate from now

on and explain why those who test positive after a lateral flow test cannot apply for a payment and do not even enter the national test and trace system?

Helen Whately: We absolutely recognise not only the importance of self-isolation, which is critical in breaking the chains of transmission, but that it is not always easy for people to do. We recognise, for instance, the cost of self-isolation, and that is why we introduced a payment of £500 for those who are on low incomes and unable to work from home while isolating. We will continue to make sure that people have the support they need to self-isolate.

Covid-19: Innova Lateral Flow Tests

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): What the evidential basis is for the use of Innova lateral flow tests for covid-19 in the asymptomatic population. [910583]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): The Innova lateral flow tests for covid-19 identify a substantial proportion of those who are shedding viral load due to their covid-19. We of course identify, analyse and publish the evidential basis for the use of these tests, as with the other tests that are used in the national testing programme.

Neale Hanvey [V]: I would like to thank the Secretary of State for that answer, and I thank him also for his helpful response to my questions in the Select Committee last week. In that spirit, he will know that I have been pursuing the use of lateral flow tests since early November, when concerns were first raised. Unfortunately, some of those concerns persist—not least when they were underscored by a communication from his Department as recently as 11 December, which stated:

“We are not currently planning mass asymptomatic testing; swab testing people with no symptoms is not an accurate way of screening the general population, as there is a...risk of giving false reassurance. Widespread asymptomatic testing could undermine the value of testing, as there is a risk of giving misleading results.”

Given those ongoing concerns, I would be most grateful if the Secretary of State committed to a meeting to consider those concerns in a bit more detail—

Mr Speaker: Order. I think the Secretary of State can take an answer off that.

Matt Hancock: Lateral flow tests are incredibly important to be able to find people who otherwise we would not be able to find. One in three people has this disease without knowing it, and finding those positive cases helps us to break the chains of transmission.

Covid-19 Contact Tracing: Effectiveness

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of covid-19 contact tracing at (a) national and (b) local authority level. [910584]

The Minister for Care (Helen Whately): I am pleased to report that the strong recent performance of the contact tracing service has been maintained, even with the significant growth in cases. The latest weekly data show that the service made contact with almost 700,000 people: 85% of positive cases were reached and

provided details of their close contacts, and 92% of those close contacts—that is almost half a million people—were then reached and told to self-isolate.

Mr Betts [V]: I was asking the director of public health in Sheffield the other day about the figures for contact tracing. He says that in the NHS Test and Trace system—not the Public Health England one, but the NHS one—the current figures are 59%, and the 40% not contacted are passed on down to the local level, the city council’s contact tracing service, which is then contacting 75% of the people the national system could not contact. Why, then, do the Government not give more resources and more responsibility to the local council and the director of public health? In that way, we could contact more people at far less cost than the national system.

Helen Whately: The hon. Member has described, in fact, what is a really important partnership working between the national NHS Test and Trace system and local partners such as local authorities, as indeed is happening in his own area of Sheffield, where it is that combined working that enables us to contact the maximum number of people and therefore to get more people to self-isolate and break these chains of transmission.

Terminally Ill People: End of Life Options

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): What plans he has to improve the evidence base for future debates on the options available for terminally ill people at the end of their life. [910587]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): Care at the end of life is a crucial part of our health and care system, and we are committed to improving the quality of care for those at the end of life. Current practice is informed by a range of evidence, including guidelines issued by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. The Government are open to gathering data on the experiences of terminally ill people in order to inform the debate.

Mr Mitchell: May I express my gratitude to the NHS in all its many forms in the Royal Town of Sutton Coldfield for their hard work over Christmas and new year, including giving me a new knee?

I thank the Secretary of State for managing to take an interest in this important subject when he is so stretched on so many other fronts. Nearly 10% of suicides are by people who are terminally ill, and the all-party group that I have the privilege of co-chairing will hear from a mother this afternoon whose terminally ill son took his own life by throwing himself under an HGV on the north circular.

To add to knowledge, information and understanding, will the Secretary of State and his Department make a point of working with coroners and the Office for National Statistics from across the country, so that we can understand the true extent of these tragedies?

Matt Hancock: I am very happy to look at the suggestion that my right hon. Friend makes on this very sensitive subject. We want to see the highest possible standards of patient safety and, of course, to reduce the number of suicides, and it is important in pursuing that to have as much information and evidence as possible.

Feilding Palmer Hospital

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): If he will take steps to ensure that Feilding Palmer Community Hospital in Lutterworth is reopened as a covid-19 vaccination centre. [910589]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Nadhim Zahawi): Across the United Kingdom we have more than 2,700 vaccination sites up and running, with seven vaccination centres opening this week and more to come next week and the week after. Regarding the question about Feilding Palmer hospital that my hon. Friend has raised, I can confirm that this site is now being actively considered as a vaccination hub.

Alberto Costa [V]: I thank the Minister and his team for the help that they gave me and my team in cajoling, pushing and encouraging the clinical commissioning group to reopen the Feilding Palmer hospital in Lutterworth as a vaccination centre; that is excellent news for the people of Lutterworth and the surrounding villages.

Will the Minister also confirm that the remaining parts of south Leicestershire, from Broughton Astley to Braunstone, from Thorpe Astley to Arnesby, will also be able to access vaccination centres locally?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to my hon. Friend not just for his characteristic support and encouragement, but for his championing of his constituents. I can confirm, as the Secretary of State has said, that all his constituents will be no more than 10 miles away from a vaccination centre, and I am pleased that the Sturdee Road health and wellbeing centre, which is a little over 10 miles away from Lutterworth, is administering vaccines now.

Covid-19: Scientific Evidence Base for Government Response

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of the scientific evidence base underpinning the Government's response to the covid-19 outbreak. [910593]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): The Government's response to the pandemic has been informed by a considerable range of expert scientific and medical advice, and we have seen an increasing understanding of coronavirus globally. The UK has produced new scientific evidence throughout the pandemic. When we take decisions, they are based on and guided by the best possible science, but of course policy decisions are for Ministers.

Bob Seely [V]: Regarding the stats and science on the Island, our vaccine hub at the Riverside centre is expected to be ready on 15 July. We may not receive sign-off and vaccines for that centre until 25 July or later. Given rising infections on the Island, our demographic profile and our isolation, I am concerned we are not high enough on the vaccine supply list, despite the great work being done by the Isle of Wight-Hampshire team. I have written to the Secretary of State and the vaccine Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), about this. What can be done to improve the situation, and what reassurance can the Secretary of State give me about the focus on the Isle of Wight?

Matt Hancock: We will absolutely have vaccines being delivered on the Isle of Wight before 15 July—indeed, we will have them there before 15 February. We are committed to offering a vaccine to all those in the four highest priority cohorts, which includes all over-70s, and there are a lot of over-70s on the Isle of Wight. Furthermore, we will make sure that there are vaccination centres within 10 miles of where everyone lives. Vaccinations are happening on the Isle of Wight right now. My hon. Friend is a great champion of the Island, and we will make sure that that delivery continues apace.

Covid-19: Vaccine Roll-out and Relaxation of Restrictions

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): What progress his Department has made on establishing the extent of roll-out of the covid-19 vaccine required to enable relaxation of covid-19 restrictions; and if he will make a statement. [R] [910596]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Nadhim Zahawi): The vaccines are without a doubt the biggest breakthrough since the pandemic began—a huge step forward in our fight against coronavirus—and, as testament to the Secretary of State's laser-like focus on a vaccines, we are here today with 2.4 million doses administered and rising. However, the full impact of covid-19 vaccinations on infection rates will not be clear until a larger number of people have been vaccinated.

Mr Steve Baker [V]: I am very pleased to welcome the announcement of a vaccination site at Adams Park in Wycombe, with further sites to be announced shortly. My hon. Friend has told us that when the top four JCVI groups have been vaccinated, that will account for 88% of potential fatalities, so can he not very soon give people a sure and not-too-distant hope that their freedoms will be returned as the vaccination programme rolls forward?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's continued support, not least in making sure that he examines the data very carefully, which I know he is passionate about. He is absolutely right that 88% of mortality effectively comes from the top four most vulnerable cohorts in the JCVI's list of nine, and 99% comes from those top nine most vulnerable cohorts.

On that point in time—that point of inflection between community spread and vaccination—I will quote the deputy chief medical officer, Jonathan Van-Tam, who said, "Ask me in a few weeks' or a few months' time if it does obviously impact on spread." The scientists are hopeful, as are we, and as is the Prime Minister—not least because he wants to see the back of these non-pharmaceutical interventions in the economy.

Covid-19: NHS Bed Capacity

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effect of the covid-19 outbreak on bed capacity throughout the NHS. [910597]

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effect of the covid-19 outbreak on bed capacity throughout the NHS. [910627]

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar): Covid, and particularly the new strain of covid, has had a significant impact on NHS bed capacity. As of 10 January, 30,758 beds across the NHS were occupied by covid patients. In just the past day, that has risen to around 32,000, which is over a third of all available beds. The latest bed occupancy data shows that just shy of 80,000 of the NHS's roughly 90,000 total general and acute beds were occupied.

Dr Huq [V]: It is great that the NHS, as I have heard locally, is working hard to stop intensive care beds running out after a decade of no expansion, now that a major incident has been declared in London. However, can the Minister guarantee that this will not just be a bureaucratic exercise? Will we take a population-based approach, listen to clinicians in apportioning capacity and allow hospitals in high-need mixed ethnicity areas, such as Ealing Hospital, which is currently on a black alert, their fair share, rather than the powerful players—the central London teaching hospitals—always getting all the extra allocation?

Edward Argar: I can reassure the hon. Lady that beds and increased capacity, where we put them in place, are allocated on the basis of where they are needed. She is right to highlight the pressure that her local hospital trust, London North West University Healthcare NHS Trust, is under. The team there, as across the NHS, are doing an amazing job, but the critical care bed occupancy rate in her trust was 98.7% on the latest figures I have. That is extremely significant pressure, but I can give her the reassurance that we look to ensure that all areas receive the resources they need.

Ellie Reeves [V]: London has declared a state of emergency, and the stark reality is that at this rate we will run out of beds for patients in the next couple of weeks. At least two NHS hospitals in the capital have already postponed urgent cancer surgery and figures show that treatment levels are failing to keep pace with demand. Will the Minister therefore commit to fully opening the London Nightingale hospital, secure the use of London's private hospitals for cancer treatment, and invest in the number of beds in our NHS for the long term?

Edward Argar: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to highlight the pressure that the NHS and critical care are under in London and, indeed, more broadly. I pay tribute again to all those who are working in the NHS, including my shadow, who I suspect has been on the frontline in recent days—I pay tribute to her, too. The best way we can thank them is by following the advice to stay at home and to follow the rules. In respect of her specific point, yes, we are involving independent sector capacity, Nightingale capacity and increasing NHS capacity—all those, alongside other measures—to ensure our NHS continues to be able to treat those who need this care at this time.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): Last night, I finished a shift in a busy east London hospital, sharing difficult news with hopeful families. The resilience of staff on the frontline can never be matched, but across the country morale is on a cliff edge. A decade of cuts to beds, services and staff, combined with pay freezes, has left NHS workers undermined and undervalued. Without our incredible staff, a hospital bed is just that

—a bed. So does the Health Minister regret how the Government have made frontline workers feel, and can he promise to change that?

Edward Argar: I reiterate, as I did earlier, my thanks to the hon. Lady and all her colleagues in the NHS for everything they are doing. I reassure her, as I do and as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State does at every opportunity, just how valued and supported our NHS is. We have put in place just over 1,000 additional critical care bed capacity at this time—the right thing to do. In addition, in respect of supporting staff, we are investing about £15 million—just one example—for mental health hubs and mental health support for staff. I saw, from the hospital that she works in, or has worked in, in her constituency, a number of staff—it was on the BBC recently—setting out just how flat out they are. The best way we can thank them, alongside what we are doing—I make no apologies for reiterating it, Mr Speaker—is by all following the rules to stay at home to help to ease the pressure on those phenomenally hard-working and valued staff in our NHS hospitals.

Topical Questions

[910549] **Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op):** If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): Yesterday, we launched our UK vaccines delivery plan, which sets out how we will vaccinate hundreds of thousands of people every day, starting with the most vulnerable and staff in the NHS and social care. I am delighted that across the UK 2.3 million people have already been vaccinated. We are on track to deliver our commitment to offer a first dose to everyone in the most vulnerable groups by 15 February. At the same time, I add my voice to all those who are passing on their very best wishes to my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire), who is undergoing further treatment on the NHS. I personally thank all those in the NHS who are looking after him and all the other patients in their care.

Rachael Maskell [V]: The NHS is overwhelmed, and critical clinical choices are having to be made due to the limitations of estate and staffing. So I ask the Secretary of State if he will do two things: first, bring all independent hospitals under the NHS to provide a response to the national crisis and, in particular, provide cancer care capacity; and secondly, call all former health professionals to return to practice and re-register even if they are beyond the three years out of practice limit, so they can work with an element of supervision and no one is denied care for their clinical need.

Matt Hancock: Of course, all these things are being looked at. The pressures on the NHS are very significant. I also want to say to people who have a healthcare condition that is not covid-related that they should come forward to the NHS. The promise of the NHS, of always treating people according to their clinical need and not ability to pay, is crucial. It is just as crucial in these pressured times as it is at any other time. If you find a lump or a bump, if you have a problem with your heart, or if there is a condition for which you need to come forward for urgent treatment, then the NHS is

open and you must help us to help you. So, yes, we absolutely will do everything we possibly can to address the pressures, including looking at the measures the hon. Lady set out, but also let the message go out that if you need the NHS for other conditions, please do come forward.

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con) [V]: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the speed of the vaccine roll-out and, in particular, his foresight in setting up the vaccine taskforce as far back as last April, which has made that possible. Personal thanks from my mum, who is getting her vaccine tomorrow at Epsom racecourse. Understandably, however, the public's expectations about how quickly they will get their vaccine are now running well ahead of the system's ability to deliver, causing floods of calls to GPs' surgeries, which are already very busy. What can we do to set expectations among the public that getting to population-level immunity will be a marathon, not a sprint?

Matt Hancock: That is right. The Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee is wise to say that this will be a marathon, not a sprint. As of the early hours of this morning, we have vaccinated 39.9% of over-80-year-olds in England. We will reach all over-80-year-olds and ensure that they have the offer of a vaccine in the coming weeks, and we will reach all of the top four priority groups by 15 February. We are on track and I am confident that we will deliver that. The other message that my right hon. Friend will perhaps help all of us to pass on to all constituents, including his mum, is that the NHS will get in contact with them and offer them an appointment. That is the best and fairest way in which we can get the roll-out happening.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): The Secretary of State will know that we cannot protect the NHS unless we also protect social care, yet there are worrying signs that the Government risk losing control of the virus there too. Infection rates in care homes have tripled in a month; homes are reporting staff absence of up to 40%; and the latest weekly care home deaths are the highest since May. So can the Secretary of State set out what immediate extra support he can provide so that the sector can cope, and will he commit to publishing daily vaccination rates for care home residents and staff, so that we know whether the Government are on track to completing all those vaccinations in less than three weeks' time?

Matt Hancock: We have made that commitment and it is incredibly important that vaccinations are offered to everybody in care homes. The NHS is working hard to deliver on that with its colleagues in social care. Across the board, colleagues are working hard to deliver this life-saving vaccine. Of course, we are always open to further support for social care and it is something that we are working on right now to ensure that we can get the right support for testing, in particular to support the workforce, who are absolutely central to making this happen.

[910550] **Jonathan Gullis** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con) [V]: In Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke, we are excited to be the planned home of a mass vaccination centre. Stoke-on-Trent City Council is working around the clock, as it has done throughout the pandemic, to

ensure that everything is ready from its end. Can my right hon. Friend give his assurances that the necessary equipment and staff will be ready to go on 25 January so that we can get more jabs into arms?

Matt Hancock: I am delighted that there is going to be a mass vaccination centre. I can give that assurance—we are working as hard as we possibly can to ensure that all the equipment is there. Everybody thinks about the vaccine—that is very important—but it is also about all the other things that are needed, such as the specialist syringes. The vaccine is so valuable that inside the syringe is a plunger that goes into the needle to squeeze the extra bit of liquid that would otherwise be left in the needle into someone's arm to make sure that every last drop of vaccine is used. A whole series of other equipment is needed alongside the actual liquid of the vaccine. I will ensure that my hon. Friend the vaccine deployment Minister makes sure that the Stoke-on-Trent mass vaccination centre is up and running and ready for 25 January.

[910552] **Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab) [V]: The covid-19 pandemic has further exposed and widened the tremendous health inequalities in Stockton, where healthy life expectancy is among the lowest in the country. It also has by far the highest number of covid cases on Teesside—now well in excess of 10,000. Secretary of State, when can we have a new hospital for Stockton to help to tackle those inequalities?

Matt Hancock: The importance of tackling health inequalities and levelling up parts of the country that have so much opportunity, such as Stockton, but need further support to unleash that opportunity is an incredibly important part of this agenda. On the hon. Gentleman's precise question, we have discussed that issue before. As he knows, we have the largest hospital building programme in the modern history of this country. I look forward to continuing to discuss with him the extra infrastructure needed in Stockton.

[910551] **Craig Whittaker** (Calder Valley) (Con) [V]: First, I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and the whole ministerial team on the excellent start to the vaccination programme. However, my question is on schools. I know that the Government worked hard to keep schools open for as long as they possibly could, but unfortunately, under alert level 5, schools sadly had to close. Will he outline what costs schools are expected to cover—whether state schools or public schools—to roll out coronavirus testing in their schools once they reopen?

Matt Hancock: Extra funding is available through the NHS Test and Trace budget for state schools for the testing programme. We are working with independent schools to make sure that they can reopen as soon as safely possible across the country.

[910553] **Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South) (Lab) [V]: Will the Secretary of State set out what additional measures are being put in place to support areas with diverse communities, such as Luton, where English not being a person's first language could be a barrier to ensuring the equitable roll-out of vaccinations across all our communities?

Matt Hancock: I answered a similar question from the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford). This is an incredibly important point, and we are working hard with councils, pharmacists, GPs and those who are trusted in the community to get out the message of the importance of vaccination to all communities across the country. This subject will be increasingly important, and I look forward to working with the hon. Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins), the Minister for the vaccine roll-out, my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), and with colleagues all across this House to get out the message of positivity around the vaccine.

The good news is that, over the last month, the proportion of people who are enthusiastic about taking the vaccine has risen significantly, and the proportion of people who are hesitant has fallen; I think people can see the enthusiasm that others have for taking the vaccine. However, we have to make sure that that message of hope reaches all parts of and all communities in the UK.

[910554] **Antony Higginbotham** (Burnley) (Con): In Burnley and Padiham, a large number of people cannot work from home; they work in areas such as manufacturing and construction. The deployment of the Army in our largest employers to do mass testing has been really welcome, but we have to go further if we are to break that chain of transmission. Will my right hon. Friend set out what my constituents need to do if they have to keep going into work but need access to some of these tests?

Matt Hancock: I hope that by working through the Burnley and Lancashire councils, and by working with the national testing programme, we can get asymptomatic testing available for those who have to go to work. Key workers need to go to work, even through this most difficult of times. I will make sure that the testing Minister picks up with my hon. Friend straight after this, and that we work together to make sure that everybody across Burnley who has to go to work has access, if they want it, to a testing regime, to help ensure that they can be safe in work.

[910555] **Carla Lockhart** (Upper Bann) (DUP) [V]: The Secretary of State will know the unprecedented physical and emotional strain our frontline nurses and medics are facing in the fight against covid-19. This is exacerbated by staff shortages, with increasing demand for care falling on our already worn-out staff. Would he agree that to encourage more people into nursing, and to retain our healthcare heroes in the NHS, we must look at increasing pay to a level that recognises the skills, responsibility and commitment that the nursing and healthcare professions require?

Matt Hancock: I am really pleased that over the past few years in the English health service that I am responsible for, we have increased the pay of nursing staff. I am also pleased that when the new Northern Ireland Administration were set up about a year ago, one of the first things they did was to resolve the challenges in terms of nurses' pay. This is a very important subject. It is one that is devolved, but I look forward to working with my counterpart in

Northern Ireland, Robin Swann, who is doing a brilliant job in supporting the Province through these very difficult times.

[910556] **Andrea Jenkyns** (Morley and Outwood) (Con) [V]: I have been contacted by a number of my constituents who have concerns about vaccine distribution. They are old and vulnerable, some are shielding, and some have no cars and have difficulty using public transport to get their vaccine. There is also a concern that some local GP surgeries are vaccinating only people over 80 with surnames from A to H. What is the Department's plan to facilitate local distribution, especially in places that do not have good transport links, and to increase the roll-out to other groups?

Matt Hancock: Among the over-80s we have not put in place a more specific prioritisation, because we need to ensure that the programme can get to all the over-80s as fast and efficiently as possible. Access is incredibly important, hence the commitment to ensure that there is a vaccination centre within 10 miles. I think that that is true across the whole of Morley and Outwood, and 96% of the population of England is now within 10 miles of a vaccination centre, including, I think, the whole of my hon. Friend's constituency. This has to be done fast but it also has to be done fairly, and she is quite right to raise that point.

[910557] **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab) [V]: As a proud Unison member, I ask the Secretary of State to join me in congratulating Christina McAnea on being elected the first female leader of the country's biggest union. Many of Unison's members effectively work for the Secretary of State, including care assistants, hospital porters, nurses and cleaners, and they are now under huge stress and facing mental and physical challenges that we, fortunately, cannot imagine. Does he agree with another recently elected leader, Joe Biden, who said to health workers:

"It's not enough to praise you. We have to protect you, we have to pay you."

Matt Hancock: I want to add my congratulations to Christina McAnea. It is another sign of progress in this country to see the first female leader of Unison, and I look forward to talking to her very soon and to working with her, as she represents a significant number of people who work for the NHS and are valued members of the NHS and social care teams. The importance not only of valuing our NHS and social care workforce but of demonstrating that value is vital, and improving all the elements and conditions under which people work is important. Of course pay is one part of that, and the hon. Lady will know that the NHS was exempt from the pay freeze set out by the Chancellor, but it is also about ensuring that everybody's contribution is valued and that everybody is encouraged to give their very best contribution. In a pandemic situation like this, when the pressures on the NHS and social care are very great, that is more important than ever, and it is important that we value all of our team all the time and that everybody plays a part in improving the health of the nation and improving and saving lives. I want to say a huge thank you to everybody who works in the NHS and in social care, and I want to work with them on improving working conditions and making sure that

everybody feels that they can give their very best so that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for raising this question.

Mr Speaker: We have had a poor day of getting through questions. They have taken far too long and a lot of people have missed out.

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.

12.35 pm

Sitting suspended.

Speaker's Statement

12.39 pm

Mr Speaker: I have a short statement to make about Select Committees. On Tuesday 24 March, the House passed an order allowing for virtual participation in Select Committee meetings and giving Chairs associated powers to make reports. I was given a power under the order to extend it if necessary. I can notify the House today that I am now further extending the order until Friday 30 April.

Xinjiang: Forced Labour

12.40 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs and First Secretary of State (Dominic Raab): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to update the House on the situation in Xinjiang and the Government's response.

The evidence of the scale and severity of the human rights violations being perpetrated in Xinjiang against the Uyghur Muslims is now far-reaching. It paints a truly harrowing picture. Violations include the extrajudicial detention of over 1 million Uyghurs and other minorities in political re-education camps; extensive and invasive surveillance targeting minorities; systematic restrictions on Uyghur culture, education and, indeed, on the practice of Islam; and the widespread use of forced labour. The nature and conditions of detention violate basic standards of human rights. At their worst, they amount to torture and inhumane and degrading treatment, alongside widespread reports of the forced sterilisation of Uyghur women.

These claims are supported now by a large, diverse and growing body of evidence that includes first-hand reports from diplomats who visit Xinjiang and the first-hand testimony from victims who have fled the region. There is satellite imagery showing the scale of the internment camps, the presence of factories inside them and the destruction of mosques. There are also extensive and credible third-party reports from non-governmental organisations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, with the United Nations and other international experts also expressing their very serious concerns.

In reality, the Chinese authorities' own publicly available documents also bear out a similar picture. They show statistical data on birth control and on security spending and recruitment in Xinjiang. They contain extensive references to coercive social measures dressed up as poverty alleviation programmes. There are leaks of classified and internal documents that have shown the guidance on how to run internment camps and lists showing how and why people have been detained.

Internment camps, arbitrary detention, political re-education, forced labour, torture and forced sterilisation—all on an industrial scale. It is truly horrific—barbarism we had hoped was lost to another era is being practised today, as we speak, in one of the leading members of the international community.

We have a moral duty to respond. The UK has already played a leading role within the international community in the effort to shine a light on the appalling treatment of the Uyghurs and to increase diplomatic pressure on China to stop and to remedy its actions. I have made my concerns over Xinjiang clear directly to China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi. We have led international joint statements on Xinjiang in the United Nations General Assembly Third Committee and the UN Human Rights Council. In the Third Committee, we brought the latest statement forward together with Germany in October last year and it was supported by 39 countries.

China's response is to deny, as a matter of fact, that any such human rights violations take place at all. They say it is lies. If there were any genuine dispute about the

[*Dominic Raab*]

evidence, there would be a reasonably straightforward way to clear up any factual misunderstandings. Of course China should be given the opportunity to rebut the various reports and claims, but the Chinese Government refuse point blank to allow the access to Xinjiang required to verify the truth of the matter.

We have repeatedly called for China to allow independent experts and UN officials, including the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, proper access to Xinjiang, just as we in this country allow access to our prisons, our police custody suites and other parts of the justice system to independent bodies who hold us to account for the commitments to respect human rights that we have made.

China cannot simply refuse all access to those trusted third-party bodies that could verify the facts and, at the same time, maintain a position of credible denial. While that access is not forthcoming, the UK will continue to support further research to understand the scale and the nature of the human rights violations in Xinjiang. But we must do more, and we will.

Xinjiang's position in the international supply chain network means that there is a real risk of businesses and public bodies around the world, whether inadvertently or otherwise, sourcing from suppliers that are complicit in the use of forced labour, allowing those responsible for violations to profit—or, indeed, making a profit themselves—by supplying the authorities in Xinjiang. Here in the UK, we must take action to ensure that UK businesses are not part of supply chains that lead to the gates of the internment camps in Xinjiang, and to ensure that the products of the human rights violations that take place in those camps do not end up on the shelves of supermarkets that we shop in here at home week in, week out.

We have already engaged with businesses with links to Xinjiang; we have encouraged them to conduct appropriate due diligence. More widely, we have made a commitment to tackling forced labour crystal clear. With the introduction of the Modern Slavery Act 2015, the United Kingdom was the first country to require companies by law to report on how they are tackling forced labour in their supply chains. Today, I can announce a range of new measures to send a clear message that those violations of human rights are unacceptable and, at the same time, to safeguard UK businesses and public bodies from any involvement or links with them.

I have been working closely with my right hon. Friends the Home Secretary, the Secretary of State for International Trade and the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. Our aim, put simply, is that no company profits from forced labour in Xinjiang, and that no UK business is involved in their supply chains. Let me set out the four new steps that we are now taking.

First, today the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and the Department for International Trade have issued new, robust and detailed guidance to UK businesses on the specific risks faced by companies with links to Xinjiang, and underlining the challenges of conducting effective due diligence there. A Minister-led campaign of business engagement will reinforce the need for UK businesses to take concerted action to address that particular and specific risk.

Secondly, we are strengthening the operation of the Modern Slavery Act. The Home Office will introduce fines for businesses that do not comply with their transparency obligations, and the Home Secretary will introduce the necessary legislation setting out the level of those fines as soon as parliamentary time allows.

Thirdly, we announced last September that the transparency requirements that apply to UK businesses under the Modern Slavery Act will be extended to the public sector. The FCDO will now work with the Cabinet Office to provide guidance and support to UK Government bodies to exclude suppliers where there is sufficient evidence of human rights violations in any of their supply chains. Let me say that we in the United Kingdom—I think rightly—take pride in the fact that the overwhelming majority of British businesses do business with great integrity and professionalism right around the world. That is their hallmark and part of our USP as a global Britain. Precisely because of that, any company profiting from forced labour will be barred from Government procurement in this country.

Fourthly, the Government will conduct an urgent review of export controls as they apply, specifically geographically, to the situation in Xinjiang, to make sure that we are doing everything we can to prevent the export of any goods that could contribute directly or indirectly to human rights violations in that region. The package that has been put together will help to ensure that no British organisations—Government or private sector, deliberately or inadvertently—will profit from or contribute to human rights violations against the Uyghurs or other minorities. I am of course sure that the whole House would accept that the overwhelming majority of British businesses would not dream of doing so. Today's measures will ensure that businesses are fully aware of those risks, will help them to protect themselves, and will shine a light on and penalise any reckless businesses that do not take those obligations seriously.

As ever, we act in co-ordination with our like-minded partners around the world, and I welcome the fact that later today Foreign Minister Champagne will set out Canada's approach on these issues. I know that Australia, the United States, France, Germany and New Zealand are also considering the approaches they take. We will continue to work with all of our international partners, but the House should know that in the comprehensive scope of the package I am setting out today the UK is again setting an example and leading the way.

We want a positive and constructive relationship with China, and we will work tirelessly towards that end, but we will not sacrifice our values or our security. We will continue to speak up for what is right and we will back up our words with actions, faithful to our values, determined, as a truly global Britain, to be an even stronger force for good in the world. I commend this statement to the House.

12.50 pm

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): The persecution of the Uyghurs has been of great concern to hon. Members in all parts of this House. We have read the reports and heard the testimony, and it is past time to act. There must be a unified message from this whole House: we will not turn away and we will not permit this to go unchallenged. So may I thank the Foreign Secretary for advance sight of his statement but say to him that the

Government had trailed in the media long-awaited sanctions on officials responsible for appalling human rights abuses in Xinjiang? We have waited months, and he briefed the papers that he was planning to announce this today. What has happened to this announcement, and who in government has overruled him this time? The strength of his words is, once again, not matched by the strength of his actions, and I am sorry to say that that will be noticed loud and clear in Beijing.

I was pleased to hear the Foreign Secretary acknowledge that the Modern Slavery Act is not working. The independent review was right to say that it has become a “tick-box exercise”, and we need a robust response to ensure that companies are not just transparent but accountable. But there is little in today’s statement that is new, and I am left slightly lost for words as to why he has chosen to come here today. Back in September the Government said they would extend the Modern Slavery Act to the public sector. He mentioned France, which has already gone further than the UK, with its duty of diligence law, which includes liability for harm. The European Union intends to bring in legislation next year on due diligence, which will be mandatory. Even under the new arrangements, will a company profiting from a supply chain involving forced labour have broken any laws in this country? What law would a company actually be breaking if it profited from what the Foreign Secretary called the “barbaric” forced labour in Xinjiang? If the UK really does intend to set an example and lead the way, he will have to do more than tinker around the edges. One of the best things he could do for those British businesses he rightly praised is to make the playing field level for the many British companies that do the right thing.

We warmly welcome the Foreign Secretary’s proposed review of export controls. If the Government are successfully able to determine whether any goods exported from the UK are contributing to violations of international law in Xinjiang, that will be a breakthrough, not just in taking robust action against China’s human rights abuses, but as a model that can be used in other countries around the world where British exports risk being misused. So we will pay close attention. He will also know that the House of Lords recently came together to pass two cross-party amendments that put human rights considerations at the centre of our trade policy. I was astonished not to hear any reference to them today. Do the Government intend to get behind those efforts to ensure that our trade policy defends, not undermines, human rights? I can tell him that I will be writing to MPs when the Trade Bill returns to this place to urge them to vote with their consciences. I hope the Government will not find themselves stranded on the wrong side of history.

We cannot allow this moment to pass us by. The Foreign Secretary was right to say that this is truly horrific, and the House is united in condemnation of what is happening in Xinjiang. Members of all parties want Britain to act as a moral force in the world. Despite today’s disappointing statement, I believe he is sincere when he says that he wants the same, but now he has to make good on his promise to back up words with real action.

Dominic Raab: May I at least thank the hon. Member for what she said about the approach that we are taking on export controls? She is wrong on a number of fronts,

though; we certainly did not brief the papers. We have said that we would keep Magnitsky sanctions under review, and we continue to do so. Only one other country has applied Magnitsky sanctions in relation to China and specifically Xinjiang, and that is the US. We are taking targeted sanctions both through the fines that we will be legislating for under the MSA and through the stronger export controls, so what she said in that regard is not accurate. All four measures that we announced today are new. I was a little surprised to hear her refer to the EU regarding the new investment deal that it has done with China, and the suggestion that it has adopted stronger measures, which is simply not factually correct.

The hon. Member referred to the amendments to the Trade Bill, which I would like to address. The noble Lord Alton’s amendment has attracted a lot of interest. I think that it is well meaning, but it would actually be rather ineffective and counterproductive. Let me briefly explain why. It would frankly be absurd for any Government to wait for the human rights situation in a country to reach the level of genocide, which is the most egregious international crime, before halting free trade agreement negotiations. Any responsible Government would have acted well before then. At the same time, every campaigner against free trade would seek to use that legal provision to delay or halt FTA negotiations by tying the Government up in litigation that may last months—if not years—with no plausible genocide concluded at the end.

Finally, although I think it is right that the courts determine whether the very specific and, frankly, technical legal definition of genocide is met in any given situation, it would be quite wrong for a Government or for hon. Members of this House to subcontract to the courts our responsibility for deciding when a country’s human rights record is sufficiently bad that we will not engage in trade negotiations. Parliament’s responsibility is to determine when sanctions take place and with whom we negotiate.

The measures that we have announced today will ensure that both business and the Government can cater for the very real risk that supply chains—either coming to the UK or going into the internment camps of Xinjiang—are not affected, and that UK businesses are not affected. The hon. Member should unequivocally support these measures.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement. Her Majesty’s Government have taken some important actions of late. Indeed, supporting the Australian Strategic Policy Institute inquiry into Xinjiang was a very worthwhile action by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. I am glad that some of the recommendations that my right hon. Friend has spoken about were in the report published by the China Research Group only a few weeks ago. There are, however, other areas into which he could go.

I am particularly conscious not just of the shaping of the economic environment that we are seeing coming out of Xinjiang and the nature of slave goods getting into the UK manufacturing chain, but also of the distortion of academic ideas and academic freedoms that we are seeing here in the UK; there is a centre in Jesus College, Cambridge that is refusing to talk about these abuses of Uyghur Muslims for fear of causing offence. Is this the first time that Jesus himself has taken 30 pieces of silver? This is a deeply disappointing moment

[Tom Tugendhat]

for all of us who believe in academic freedom in the UK, and it is another example of why the UK and the Foreign Office need to be clear in demonstrating that dirty goods are one thing, but dirty money is also unacceptable.

Dominic Raab: I pay tribute to the work that my hon. Friend has done in the Foreign Affairs Committee, and in the parliamentary grouping to which he referred, including the report that that group published. I thank him for his support for these important measures. They are very targeted—this is often the case with international organised crime or war crimes—to ensure that we follow the money and prevent the ability to profit from, or to financially support, the kinds of actions on which we all want to clamp down.

My hon. Friend raised the issue of academic freedoms. We are taking further measures in that regard, and further legislative measures will be taken when the relevant legislative vehicles are brought forth. He is absolutely right to raise this issue. He talked about Jesus College, Cambridge; I did my LLM there. There is a very real risk of academic coercion in places where we need to protect the heartbeat and the life and soul of freedom of expression and debate, and there is also a risk to research that takes place, in advance of it becoming intellectual property. In all those areas, in both non-legislative and legislative measures, we are actively looking at that.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP) [V]: I thank the Foreign Secretary for advance sight of his statement, and indeed, I thank him for the statement; these are measures that we and colleagues across the House have called for over a number of months, so I am glad to see some progress today. While I would like to see more, as usual, I do not doubt that the reaction to this from Beijing has been and will be ferocious. It is important for me to put on record our support for the objectives that the Foreign Secretary has set out. I do not believe in pretending difference exists where it does not, and I believe in working together where we agree.

In that spirit, I have a couple of constructive suggestions. I note with interest the Foreign Secretary's reassurance that the Government did not brief the press—well, somebody did. There was an expectation of a more concrete announcement today on Magnitsky sanctions than we have had. I reiterate my view, which I know he shares, that Magnitsky sanctions allow a very targeted response against individuals who are directing the sorts of activities that we do not want to see. I warmly echo the comments of the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) on Confucius institutes. These organisations are directly much closer within the control of the UK Government, and they merit a lot more scrutiny than they have been getting.

The Foreign Secretary says that scrutiny of the supply chain will go up to “the gates” of labour camps. I applaud that and warmly welcome it, but getting the due diligence right will be a challenge, because there is a lot of opacity within the supply chains here. I have not seen the detail of the package yet, but I look forward to an assurance from him that it will indeed go right up to the gates of the camps. The Home Secretary has yet to lodge the legislation setting out what the fines for

malfeasance will be. I would welcome a reassurance from the Foreign Secretary that those fines will be sufficient to focus corporate minds, and not just another sunk cost. I think we agree on that, but reassurance would be useful.

I have discussed previously with the Minister for Asia how warmly we welcome the extension of the procurement rules to Government Departments. On the exclusion of companies from Government procurement contracts, could the Foreign Secretary reassure us that that will extend to groups of companies? Many of the companies involved in dubious activities will be trading subsidiaries, so I would welcome an assurance that this measure will apply to groups of companies and that there will be a more robust approach to this than a strictly legal one.

Perhaps it is just a point of drafting in the statement, but can the Foreign Secretary assure us that the audit of export regime controls to Xinjiang will extend to goods that might end up in Xinjiang, not just those going directly to it? Again, the opacity of the supply chains—

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member has two minutes, and he is now almost on three. Is he about to finish?

Alyn Smith: Forgive me, Mr Speaker. I had a couple of points; that was my final one, and I look forward to the answers.

Dominic Raab: On the hon. Gentleman's last point, we will make sure that the audit trail includes direct and indirect elements of the supply chain. I thank him for his full-throated and undiluted support for these measures. On Magnitsky, we will keep that in reserve. The advantage of the measures we are taking is that they will target in a forensic way either those profiting from forced labour or those who would financially support it, whether deliberately or otherwise.

I take the hon. Gentleman's point on academic freedom, which I raised in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat). On the due diligence of the audit trail for businesses, there will be a ministerially led series of engagement, to both advise and warn them of the risk to their supply chains of doing business or touching on business links with Xinjiang.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the level of fines; I will of course leave that to the Home Secretary, but they will need to be struck at a level at which they can deter those who willingly flout the transparency requirements.

Finally, on Government procurement, the measures we have announced will apply in England. I hope that the Scottish Government and the other devolved Administrations, with whom we will collaborate very closely, will be able to follow suit. The hon. Gentleman will understand that we will of course want to respect their competences, but that is something on which we could usefully work together.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. The effects of the things he has announced today have been called for by the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China and by the Centre for Social Justice in respect of modern-day slavery, so I welcome them. It is vital to crack down on businesses and their supply chains. However, in this week of the holocaust memorial, surely Magnitsky sanctions should have been on the list. I

happen to believe that my right hon. Friend wants that to be the case, so I wonder who in Government is blocking it. Perhaps he can whisper it to me in the Chamber; I promise him that I will not tell anybody else outside. The reality is that we need those sanctions now, because the evidence is clear.

Genocide really is a vital issue for us, and my right hon. Friend now needs to sit down with me and others to discuss bringing forward a better amendment to make sure that we can start the process. In this week of the holocaust memorial, we need to act; after all, when they last did not act, just look what happened.

Dominic Raab: I thank my right hon. Friend and pay tribute to the work that the IPA and the CSJ have done and to his leadership on this subject. I also thank him for again full-throatedly welcoming the measures we have taken. They are quite technical and forensic but, as I said, they target those who either profit from or help to finance the gruesome trade in the internment camps.

My right hon. Friend will have heard me make the point already that on Magnitsky sanctions we keep it under review—it is evidence-led and we work with our allies. He will know that in relation to Xinjiang so far only the US has brought in Magnitsky sanctions, but that is something we have certainly not ruled out. The measures we have taken today are actually more targeted and forensic in addressing the finance going into or profiting from and coming out of the labour camps.

I am happy to talk to my right hon. Friend about the issue of genocide. He will know that my father fled the holocaust; I could not take it more seriously. I hope he will also have listened to what I said to the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy); he will be all too aware of the risks of subcontracting issues to the courts that are rightly the responsibility and the prerogative of this House, and also the fact that, frankly, we should be taking action well below the level of a genocide in terms of the Executive decisions that we make.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD) [V]: I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement. I believe that he cares about these issues, as we all do, and I was pleased to hear him say that more must be done. He also mentioned:

“Internment camps, arbitrary detention, political re-education, forced labour, torture and forced sterilisation—all on an industrial scale.”

Horrific and barbaric, yes, but there is another word and it is genocide.

Given China’s blocking of routes to pursue genocide amendments through international courts, does not the UK have a responsibility, in line with its obligations under the genocide convention, to find alternative routes to make the legal determination? Will the Foreign Secretary clarify the Government’s position, which previously was that the determination of genocide is a matter for judges, not politicians? He seemed to contradict that a little today. I echo what has already been said about coming up with an amendment that can get cross-party support: this House clearly wants to discuss this issue and do something about it; we must act and not stand by.

Dominic Raab: I thank the hon. Lady for—I think—her support for the measures we have announced today. She is right to point to the need for a court to determine the very specific and, frankly, very exacting definition of

genocide. When I was a war crimes lawyer, at the time—it is probably still true today—that determination had been made only in relation to Bosnia, Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge and Rwanda. It is very exacting and a lot of international lawyers have criticised it for that reason. There is a big difference between saying that it is for the courts to determine that specific requirement under international law and saying that it is for the courts to decide when and how this House and this Government engage in free trade negotiations. Frankly, the bar would be well below the level of genocide, and it is unthinkable that this Government would engage in free trade negotiations with any country that came close to that kind of level of human rights abuse.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): I welcome the Foreign Secretary’s statement today and the four new measures that focus on business requirements and supply chains to Xinjiang, which is something that the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee has been looking at. None the less, I found the rest of the statement quite chilling. My right hon. Friend talks about the high level of the crime—the vilest of all crimes—being committed. In particular, he mentioned birth control and forced sterilisation, which are markers of genocide. I am confused about why he cannot call this crime what it is and ensure that Britain is not complicit in genocide. He has talked about judges, but we know that the UN is a busted flush when it comes to investigating genocide and when it comes to China. Even though the amendment, which is in the other House but will return here, is not perfect because it asks judges to get involved, the Foreign Secretary has an opportunity to sit with colleagues and come up with a better amendment that focuses on judges, not on trade, on investigating genocide and on bringing that decision back to the House. There is no excuse, Mr Speaker, for allowing these atrocities to continue.

Dominic Raab: I thank my hon. Friend. I know that she takes a close interest in these matters. I pay tribute to the work of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee. In relation to the genocide definition, it is not just evidence that persecution is taking place to destroy a group, but evidence that it is taking place with the intention to destroy a group as such. It has very rarely been found in international forums, because that definition is so high. She is right to acknowledge that the amendment is, in her words, “not perfect”. In some respects, it could be counterproductive. The No. 1 thing to advance this debate in a sensible and targeted way and in a way that would attract international support would be to secure the UN human rights commissioner, or another authoritative third body, to be able to go in and review and verify authoritatively what is going on in Xinjiang. I raised that with the United Nations Secretary-General yesterday.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his clear determination to address the human rights abuses in China. Despite having had much less media attention lately, Tibetan Buddhists have faced persecution similar to that of the Uyghurs at the hands of the Chinese Government. More than half a million labourers were detained in camps in the first seven months of 2020 alone. It is suspected that the labour of Uyghurs and of Tibetan detainees is also in the supply chains of businesses that are household

[*Jim Shannon*]

names in the United Kingdom. Will he outline what he is doing to address the issue of forced labour from other areas under Chinese Communist party control?

Dominic Raab: I thank the hon. Gentleman, who is also a friend, for consistently raising these issues in a very targeted way. We are deeply concerned about the human rights situation in Tibet, including restrictions on freedom of religion, freedom of religious belief, and freedom of assembly, and also about the reports of forced labour. The evidence is not quite as well documented as it is in relation to Xinjiang, but we will, of course, keep those measures under review. Indeed, the transparency requirements under the Modern Slavery Act 2015 will apply across the board, not just in relation to Xinjiang.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con) [V]: I am not sure that I was listening to the same statement as the shadow Foreign Secretary. I thought that, as a statement about our values, it was extremely clear. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that it is plainly morally unacceptable for British firms to profit from forced labour? We should also bear it in mind that there are now 1 million people extra-judicially interned in Xinjiang. Will he confirm the implications of what he said about torture? Torture is a crime of universal jurisdiction, so perhaps he could tell us what the implications are for Chinese officials now engaged in that.

Dominic Raab: I thank my hon. Friend for his support for the measures we are taking. He is right about them. I share his concern in relation to Xinjiang and also, specifically, torture. Torture is an international crime, and anyone who engages in it, directs it or even takes an order in relation to it will be guilty under international law. The real challenge with China, as we know, is how to get remedy—redress—for these actions. The measures that we have announced today will prevent any profiting from forced labour, or indeed torture, and also prevent any UK businesses from financially supporting it, whether inadvertently or otherwise.

If we want more significant accountability, the answer is to get an authoritative third-party body that is to review such matters—as, with the greatest respect to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), we have managed to secure in relation to World Health Organisation access to China this week. We have to keep pressing, with our international partners. That is why the group of international partners that is assembled is very important. It must be as broad as possible in order to secure access for the UN Human Rights Commissioner.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab) [V]: Of course I warmly welcome these measures, but they simply are not sufficient for the moment at hand. We need only listen to the Secretary of State's own comments and read them against the genocide convention to see that there is a clear example of genocide being practised in Xinjiang now. Killing people, causing bodily or mental harm, preventing births, forcibly transferring children—these are all the markers of genocide. Of course we need to come to a view both in this House and in the courts, but the difficulty about doing so through the courts is that China has a veto. How are we going to make sure that we name this as it properly is and that the people who

are accountable for it actually come to justice? I have lauded the Secretary of State many times for introducing the Magnitsky measures, but there is no point in having them and just constantly reviewing them if we never blasted well use them.

Dominic Raab: We have used the Magnitsky sanctions. We recently announced another tranche of measures in addition to the first, and, as the hon. Gentleman will know, we are working on proposals to extend the model to corruption, so we have been extremely assiduous in this area. I understand his point about how we actually hold people individually to account for these crimes. Whether it is genocide or gross human rights violations, the label is less important than the accountability for what are, no doubt, egregious crimes, but he has not suggested anything to me that would precipitate that. We are taking the targeted measures that will cut the funding, inadvertently or otherwise, going into the internment camps, and prevent those in the internment camps who are running them from profiting from it. If we want any wider initiative, we will need a far wider range of international support and we will need to get authoritative third parties to have some kind of access. That is why I referred to the work of the United Nations Human Rights Commissioner, as difficult and challenging as it is, and why I raised it with António Guterres yesterday.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): My right hon. Friend has made a very well measured and balanced statement. Of course we seek a constructive relationship with China, but it has to be within the rules-based system. As he has so eloquently made clear, global Britain is values-driven or it is nothing. May I add to those who have urged him to keep on the table continuously the Magnitsky provisions, which he, I and others worked so hard to get through the House, to ensure that those provisions are consistently kept under review? On the subject of Jesus College, of which I am also an alumnus, may I make it clear that there are two China centres? My hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) was referring to the one run by Peter Nolan.

Dominic Raab: I thank my right hon. Friend for his knowledge and for his commitment on this issue. He is absolutely right in what he said. I thank him for his support. He is right to say that we need a balanced approach. China is here to stay as an asymmetrical economic influence. There are positives in the relationship as well as the negatives. In particular, it has taken steps on climate change, which is very important. It is the biggest net emitter but also the biggest investor in renewables. We want to try to have a constructive relationship. What I have set out today, what this Government believe in and what this Prime Minister believes in is that we will not duck when the issue of our security is at stake and we will not duck when our values are at stake. Of course we will not take the Magnitsky sanctions lever off the table, and of course it is evidence-driven in relation to the particular individuals; that has to be collated very carefully. Only one country so far has instituted sanctions, but I can assure him that it is not off the table.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab) [V]: The persecution, genocide and horrific human rights abuses faced by Uyghur Muslims at the hands of the Chinese

Government is an issue that I and many others across the House have been raising for a considerable period, so of course it is welcome that the Government are finally taking some action. However, this action still does not go far enough, as pointed out by a number of hon. Members. Even those Uyghur who have managed to flee China as refugees are still being forcibly returned. So will the UK go further, and call for a full independent UN investigation and push regional countries to grant protection to Uyghur refugees?

Dominic Raab: I thank the hon. Gentleman. He, palpably and sincerely, is as committed as I am to doing what we can to have accountability and to deterring the appalling violations of human rights. We have set out the measures on the finance and profiting from it that I think will be important in the way I have described.

In relation to an independent investigation, of course the challenge, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) has said, is getting access to the relevant parts of Xinjiang. That is why I believe, and I hope the hon. Gentleman will support this, that one of the things we ought to be doing is gathering as wide as possible a group of like-minded countries to press for the United Nations Human Rights Commissioner to be able to have access. That would have the dual benefit, first, of substantiating the widespread reports of the violations of human rights I have described and, secondly, give China its opportunity to rebut and to reject those claims based on the evidence that it and only it has and can control.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con) [V]: I welcome this statement and the exceptional strength of the terms in which it was made by my right hon. Friend. As somebody who represents thousands of British Muslims, I can tell him that this is an issue of the most acute concern right here in Wycombe. I listened to how he answered the Labour Front Bench and also our hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani). The Government will need to be extremely careful to make sure that they demonstrate to British Muslims that we are in fact taking leadership in this matter by any international standard, and I would ask him to make sure that he does at all times maintain our leadership.

Dominic Raab: I thank my hon. Friend, and he is absolutely right. There will be widespread concern among Muslim communities right across the country about this issue. I can reassure him that we have led in the UN General Assembly Third Committee, we have led in the United Nations Human Rights Council and we have led the way very much with the package of measures that I have announced today. We will continue to work with our international partners—including Muslim and Arab countries and those of the region, as well as with the traditional and predictable Five Eyes and European partners—to try to expand the caucus of like-minded states that will stand up to be counted on these issues. I believe that we are the ones setting an example and that we are the ones, in his words, leading the way.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab) [V]: As others have said repeatedly, this is genocide—very clearly genocide—and the parallels with the 1930s are equally clear. The Foreign Secretary knows that at least as well as anyone else. The boldness of the Chinese Government is demonstrated by the fact that they repeatedly claim that forced sterilisation is a victory for feminism. As

twisted propaganda goes, that is about as bad as it gets. Could I ask him a specific question: in his discussions with the Home Secretary and others across Government, could they look at the possibility of prioritising asylum applications from Uyghur Muslims and offering appropriate support to those applicants? When they arrive in Britain, as some undoubtedly will—hopefully they will—they will be vulnerable and they will be traumatised, and they are also very likely to have no English at all.

Dominic Raab: I share the hon. Gentleman's concerns about the appalling human rights violations. He asked whether we could prioritise one category of asylum claimants over another. I think that would be problematic. The asylum system is blind to region or political considerations; it is based on the suffering and persecution that the individual can present. I think that is the right approach, but of course I take on board the points that he made about ensuring that those who have suffered such awful crimes when they arrive in this country get the support that they need.

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con) [V]: It is clear that in western China more than half a million minority workers are being coerced into seasonal cotton picking. That, of course, is in addition to a large-scale network of detention camps, where more than 1 million are reportedly being forced to work in textile factories. All of this is denied by the Chinese Government. I very much welcome today's announcement. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the mechanisms will be key to combating forced labour and modern slavery?

Dominic Raab: I welcome my hon. Friend's support. The mechanisms will be an important tool; they are very targeted and forensic. What is also important is that we work with our international partners, because of course we are just one country. If we want to deal with supply chains and prevent the kind of abuse, or the profiting from abuse, that we are all, I think, in this House rightly concerned about, we need to get the widest caucus of support in order that those measures are effective as possible.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): The Secretary of State will know that the World Uyghur Congress has called for the Uyghur diaspora, such as it is, to be provided with financial, medical, psychological and legal support. I echo the calls made by the hon. Members for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) and for Leyton and Wanstead (John Cryer) about discussing this with the Home Office. Even if we cannot give them priority, at the very least there ought to be a presumption against the deportation to China of anyone from the Uyghur community who is seeking refuge and asylum.

Dominic Raab: Of course, anyone who has a claim to asylum could not be deported. Those are the rules, so people may apply. If we want to strengthen that and go further, I would welcome the hon. Gentleman's support in working with the Scottish Government and the devolved Administrations more generally to ensure that in lockstep the UK can send out a single, coherent, crystal-clear message. That would be a good example of global Britain, on which we should all be able to work together.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con) [V]: Whether it be abuses against the Uyghur in Xinjiang or against people in Hong Kong, Tibet or elsewhere, does my right

[Henry Smith]

hon. Friend agree that it is the responsibility of the United Kingdom to build a global alliance to ensure that we act together against a China that is going against international norms? What is this country doing in that respect?

Dominic Raab: I point to the work that we did in the Human Rights Council and on the Third Committee of the UN General Assembly where we collated more than 30 countries to support our statement on human rights in both Hong Kong and Xinjiang. Of course, many countries are nervous in their dealings with China because of its asymmetric economic clout. Therefore we need to proceed carefully and sensitively to ensure that we carry with us as many people, and as many countries, as possible in order to have the maximum effect in deterring the actions that China takes and to maximise our chances of protecting human rights.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: I welcome what the Foreign Secretary has said. I think he has been strong, though he could be a bit stronger on sanctions. Right across the piece this is a repressive regime that hates democracy and does not care for human rights. Can he comment on what I thought was a veiled threat from the Chinese ambassador, who recently left our shores, when he said that the UK must make up its mind on whether it is a rival or a partner?

Dominic Raab: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his support. We will not take dictats from any Government on the way we proceed. We recognise, as I said, the scope for positive relations with China; the example I gave was climate change. However, I was also clear that we will absolutely protect every area of our national security and we will stand up for our values. I thought, frankly, that the ambassador's performance on "The Andrew Marr Show" when he was shown live footage of what is going on in Xinjiang represented all the scrutiny that we need to see and promote. It was a good example of the questions that are left unanswered by the Government in Beijing.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement. Today we are deeply concerned about the plight of the Uyghurs; on another day it is the plight of the Rohingya and on yet another day the Yazidis. How can we effectively hold those responsible to account so that we can truly say and mean the words "Never again"?

Dominic Raab: I thank my hon. Friend, and pay tribute to her and congratulate her on her recent appointment as special envoy for freedom of religion or belief; her knowledge and tenacity will stand her in good stead and be a great asset to global Britain.

My hon. Friend is right to raise all the different groups; in relation to the Rohingya, that is an area where we introduced Magnitsky sanctions. The most important thing to do is proceed first of all with targeted measures, as we have done today, to try to address the specific wrongs we wish to right, and to work effectively and assiduously with all our international partners. In many of these cases shifting the dial and making the relevant Government listen requires concerted international action, and that is what we are committed to.

Shabana Mahmood (Birmingham, Ladywood) (Lab) [V]: I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. The measures announced today are welcome, but they do not sufficiently address the genocide against the Uyghur people and other ethnic and religious minorities in Xinjiang. I noted with deep dismay his remarks about the amendment to the Trade Bill regarding China, which many other Members will wish to support. Will the Foreign Secretary at least acknowledge that efforts to allow UK judges to provide expert input and make preliminary determinations on genocide is, in the absence of any other viable legal option, the only legal route to hold the Chinese Government to account and the only viable opportunity in a legal forum to call their actions by their proper name: "genocide"?

Dominic Raab: I thank the hon. Lady and respect the passion and commitment with which she speaks. Of course I do not think the amendment she refers to would hold China to account for the awful human rights violations that she and I rightly deplore.

What we have sought to do today—and we will continue to do so—is take the targeted measures that will have an effect and an impact on the conduct that we want to stop by preventing people from profiting from it or financially supporting it. I think that is the right approach. Of course, we keep other measures in reserve, such as Magnitsky sanctions, but I do not think that the proposal that the hon. Lady has referred to would advance the cause of accountability in any meaningful sense at all.

Suzanne Webb (Stourbridge) (Con) [V]: I welcome the Secretary of State's statement today. Does he agree that it is essential for the relevant international bodies to be granted unfettered access to Xinjiang to assess human rights abuses occurring?

Dominic Raab: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. The most important thing that could shift the dial on accountability—and, frankly, have a deterrent effect—would be an authoritative third party being able to go and review and test the denials of the Chinese Government against the widespread reports that we have seen. I personally think the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights is well placed to do that—authoritative, independent, no bias, no partisanship, no political interference. China has rejected that. We need to keep the pressure up for that individual or someone else of a similar level of impartiality, influence and authority.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab) [V]: What is happening in Xinjiang is the tragic reality of state-sanctioned Islamophobia. Leaders within the Muslim community in Luton North have expressed to me their horror at seeing this Government stand idly by while these human rights abuses are carried out, including reports of the forced sterilisation of Uyghur women, which is expressly forbidden under article II(d) of the UN convention on genocide.

I have asked before and I ask again: will the UK Government now use, not just talk about, sanctions to address these gross human rights abuses imposed on the Uyghur people?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Lady may have missed what I said: through the transparency requirements, the fines, the export controls and the four measures I announced

today, we are increasing the strength of the targeted measures we are taking. Of course, as other Members have asked, we hold the Magnitsky sanctions in reserve.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Con): The appalling and abhorrent persecution of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang has rightly received sustained condemnation not only from all parts of this House but from around the world. Let us not mince words and let us call it what it is: genocide.

As we head towards Holocaust Memorial Day, for which this year's theme is to be the light in the darkness, let us, the UK, be that light in the darkness and take a firm stance against these crimes. With that in mind, will my right hon. Friend outline what practical steps he is taking to co-ordinate international responses, providing hard-hitting sanctions against the Chinese Government and all those guilty of these heinous crimes?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Before I call the Foreign Secretary, I should say that it is really important that questions be short. I have had to cut down the speaking list because we have another statement, then a well-subscribed debate.

Dominic Raab: I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bury South (Christian Wakeford). I think that we have shown precisely the international leadership that he has cited. The reality is that we gained, I think, 35-plus countries in support of our statement in the United Nations General Assembly Third Committee, but a lot of countries around the world either do not wish to take the measures that he described or are understandably nervous, given their proximity to China or their economic size, about the reprisals that China would take. We need to proceed carefully and sensitively with our international partners—on that point, he is absolutely right.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab) [V]: Although I welcome the Foreign Secretary's announcement on forced Uyghur labour, like a number of hon. Members I feel that it failed to address suspected genocide against Uyghur Muslims. A recent tweet by the Chinese Communist party branded the forced sterilisation of Uyghur women emancipation. The UN convention on genocide clearly forbids such measures, so what steps is the Foreign Secretary taking to support the appointment of a UN special rapporteur to investigate forced labour and ethnic persecution in Xinjiang?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Gentleman raises a really interesting matter, and I know that he has raised it before. The challenge is that we know that China would block efforts to appoint a special rapporteur or envoy. He would agree that we do not want to give that, if you like, PR coup or failed initiative to our detractors.

The one thing we can and should do, as I have said several times to the House, is focus on getting the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights some kind of access to Xinjiang. That will keep it on the agenda—I do not think that anyone can accuse the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights of being anything other than objective and impartial. That is something that other countries ought to be able to rally to, and that is where we have focused our efforts.

Dr Jamie Wallis (Bridgend) (Con) [V]: I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement, and I welcome the measures that he has outlined. Would he agree that if China is to be considered a leading member of the international community it must abide by basic international rules and norms?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He is right as a matter of human rights, but he is also right as a matter of trust. One of the issues on this and in relation to the joint declaration in the context of Hong Kong, as we have said, is that these are obligations freely assumed. These are basic obligations that come with being a responsible and, as he says, leading member of the international community. Ultimately, if China cannot live up to those responsibilities and obligations, that raises a much broader issue of trust and confidence.

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP) [V]: The poet Perhat Tursun, one of the foremost living writers in the Uyghur language, is one of around 1 million who have been disappeared by the Chinese state into the so-called re-education camps. Tursun has been missing since his detention in January 2018. In one of his poems, he writes presciently:

“When they search the streets and cannot find my vanished figure

Do you know that I am with you”.

The Foreign Secretary must go further than today's announcements. Uyghurs are not being persecuted for what they pick, but for who they are. As with the Tibetans, does he support their right to the self-determination that they seek?

Dominic Raab: We certainly want to see the human rights, freedoms and basic liberties of the people of Tibet, Hong Kong and Xinjiang respected. We are taking a series of measures, and are in the vanguard internationally with the measures that we have taken. It is important to try to keep clusters of like-minded partners with us to have the maximum effect precisely to provide redress and accountability for the violations of human rights that the hon. Gentleman and I rightly deplore.

Dehenna Davison (Bishop Auckland) (Con) [V]: I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement and welcome the strong stance that we are taking against the atrocious human rights violations we are seeing evidence of. I have had a number of constituents ask how we in the UK can play our part in tackling those violations. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is incumbent on businesses to ensure that nothing they are doing is contributing to making the situation in Xinjiang worse?

Dominic Raab: I absolutely agree with the spirit, but also the practical advice and warning that my hon. Friend is giving. What we are trying to do is set out clear guidance for businesses, to which she refers, to make sure they are warned of the risks, because of course conducting due diligence on supply chains emanating from Xinjiang is quite tricky. We want to work with them, which is why Ministers will be engaging with businesses. Ultimately, they need to comply with their transparency obligations, so that everyone can see the due diligence they have conducted. If they do that, they have nothing to fear. If they do not, we will fine them.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con) [V]: The Government are to be congratulated on the international leadership they have applied in this matter. To what extent does the Foreign Secretary think that the bribes, inducements and threats under the belt and road initiative are muting international condemnation from countries in Africa, the middle east and continental Europe that would otherwise be expected to join the UK wholeheartedly in condemning the depredations of President Xi and his people?

Dominic Raab: My right hon. Friend will know—I pay tribute to his time at the Foreign Office, where he was an exceptional Minister—the challenges we face. He asks about belt and road. The truth is that China is a massive investor all over the world. We can see, with the EU investment agreement right the way through to what the Chinese Government are doing in Africa, that there is a huge amount of money at stake.

China has asymmetric economic size and clout, and of course countries are bearing that in mind and taking that into account. What we have to do is ensure there is a compelling, plausible, credible alternative to those investments, and make sure that everyone understands the shared value and stake we have in upholding the rules-based international system, of which human rights are a key component.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Vauxhall residents have contacted me, appalled at the widespread forced labour of the Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang province. We must do everything in our power to stop the Chinese Government abusing their own people and to ensure that those responsible are held to account. I welcome the measures outlined by the Foreign Secretary on what additional help we can offer by getting our own house in order when it comes to doing business with Xinjiang, but the world must be united in its message to China. Can the Secretary of State confirm what further actions we are taking with our allies across the world to take a shared robust response to these appalling abuses?

Dominic Raab: I share the outrage of the hon. Lady's constituents and I thank her for her support. We have laid out a suite of measures. I have explained what we are doing in the Human Rights Council, the United Nations General Assembly Third Committee.

We keep working with our international partners, but, as the hon. Lady will have noted, while we are leading the way a lot of countries are nervous of speaking out, partly because of China's economic clout. We have certainly been having conversations with many countries, including countries with larger Muslim populations than our own, about why they are not more outspoken on this issue.

One of the things that I think would help, given China's blanket denial, is to get the UN Human Rights Commissioner into Xinjiang, so there can be no doubt, no quibbling and no question but that these violations are taking place. Having an authoritative and independent party like the UN Human Rights Commissioner conduct that kind of review would help to raise the kind of coalition of the like-minded that the hon. Lady talks about.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con) [V]: I very much welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement on dealing with the horrific situation in Xinjiang. With

regards to the United Kingdom's leadership on the matter and the further actions it can take, the UK will be hosting the G7 later this year and will have the presidency of the Security Council next month, in February. Will this issue and the wider topic of freedom of religion or belief be put on the agenda of both conferences and events to show the United Kingdom's strong leadership and to take firm, decisive action?

Dominic Raab: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's work as special envoy for freedom of religion or belief. I can assure him, without divulging too much of the agenda in advance, that human rights will be at the forefront of our leadership this year—our presidency of the UN Security Council, our G7 presidency and more generally—because we believe that the UK has a crucial role to play in promoting open societies, including on human rights, but also in defending public goods in areas such as climate change and covid response.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab) [V]: Like others, I have been horrified by the reports of human rights abuses in Xinjiang, including mass detentions, forced sterilisations, efforts to restrict cultural and religious practices, and mass surveillance, disproportionately targeting the Uyghur population. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to support the appointment of a UN special rapporteur for the investigation of forced labour and ethnic persecution in Xinjiang?

Dominic Raab: We would certainly welcome such a special envoy, but, as I said in answer to a previous question, the reality is that China will block that if we formally propose it. That is why, as I have said repeatedly, what really matters is that an authoritative, independent, non-partisan individual or body can have access to Xinjiang. The UN human rights commissioner would seem to me to be one such individual who could perform that role—there are others—which is why we have raised it with our international partners and I have raised it with the UN Secretary-General.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con) [V]: Last week, the Chinese embassy in Washington proudly proclaimed that employment policies in Xinjiang promoted gender equality for Uyghur women, so now we know that the Chinese Government are an equal opportunities slave labour employer. I strongly welcome these measures, but will my right hon. Friend go further? Will he not just call out this persecution at the UN as genocide and invoke Magnitsky sanctions, as colleagues have suggested, but follow the example of Congress in passing a reciprocal access Bill—I have my Tibet (Reciprocal Access) Bill on the Order Paper—to prohibit Chinese officials from travelling to the UK if UK and western human rights inspectors are denied access to factories and prisons in Xinjiang and Tibet, for example, to verify the new measures that he has announced today?

Dominic Raab: I thank my hon. Friend for his support for the measures that we have taken. I understand that he wants us to go even further. He knows—he is an expert in this area—the challenges in cajoling and carrying an international coalition to advance those goals. He is right to say that scrutiny and accountability are key. That is why we want to see an authoritative third party such as the UN Human Rights Commissioner have access

to Xinjiang. I will await his Bill with great interest, and I am sure Members will scrutinise it very carefully when it comes before the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am afraid that this will be the last question, because we had an hour allocated and we will have been an hour and 10 minutes by the time we have finished this one. The last question is from Alistair Carmichael, and I think it is audio only.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD) [V]: Frustrating though it is for many of us, I understand the Foreign Secretary's reluctance to engage on the question of genocide, but he will know from his own professional background that the Government have a duty to assess the risk factors of genocide against the Uyghurs in China in order to trigger their duty to prevent. All this came from the International Court of Justice judgment in the case of *Bosnia and Herzegovina v. Serbia and Montenegro*. He will also know that that obligation crystallises at the moment that a state learns, or should have learned, of the serious risk of genocide. Can he confirm that his Department is making that assessment of the risk factors of genocide, and will he publish its conclusions?

Dominic Raab: The right hon. Gentleman makes an interesting and insightful comment on genocide. Of course, I was in The Hague when the Bosnia judgment was being considered.

The reality is that, in order to secure authoritative assessment and conclusions in relation to those widespread reports, which we think are tenable, plausible and credible, we need access to the camps. In a sense, throughout this statement, we are redefining the question. However, we come back to the point that we need to try to secure access to Xinjiang, and we will not be able to do that without sufficient and widespread pressure on the Chinese Government. The best vehicle for that is an authoritative, independent body or individual entrusted by the United Nations, of which China is a leading member through the Security Council. The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights seems to me the right place and the right individual to support in that regard.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Foreign Secretary for that statement. In order to allow the safe exit of hon. Members participating in this item of business and the safe arrival of those participating in the next, I am suspending the House for three minutes.

1.50 pm

Sitting suspended.

Covid-19 Response: Defence Support

1.53 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace): With permission, I will update the House on Defence support in the national covid response. As hon. Members are aware, I committed to updating Parliament on our efforts, and the Ministry of Defence has been submitting weekly updates on the work to assist our outstanding NHS and colleagues from across government as we fight back against this awful virus. We might not be on the frontline of this particular fight, but we are with them in the trenches—and, since late last year, in increasing numbers. In fact, Defence's contribution to the covid response now represents the most significant domestic resilience operation in peacetime, with more personnel committed on UK resilience tasks today than at any time since the start of the pandemic. That is why it is important to now make a statement to the House detailing the breadth and complexity of those activities.

It is worth considering some statistics on what has been provided thus far. Since last January, Standing Joint Command has received some 485 military assistance to civilian authority requests—MACAs—some 400 of which are related to our domestic covid response. That is more than three times the average annual number. We currently have 56 ongoing tasks in support of 13 other Government Departments, with 4,670 personnel committed and almost 10,000 more held at high readiness, available to rapidly respond to any increase in demand.

As is well known, the UK armed forces have helped build Nightingale hospitals around the country and have distributed vital personal protective equipment, delivering more than 6 million items to hospitals and clocking up enough miles to circumnavigate the world 10 times. Personnel from all three services have backfilled oxygen tanker drivers, Welsh ambulance drivers and NHS hospital staff such as those deployed to Essex trusts this week. They have helped care assistants shoulder the burden in care homes and assisted testing programmes in schools and the wider community.

During Christmas, when the new variant of covid disrupted the border crossings, the military stepped up. While most of us were settling down for our festive dinner and break, the military were working with the Department for Transport to test hauliers crossing the English channel and clear the backlog. Approximately 40,000 tests have been conducted in that operation.

At all times, our people have shown themselves to be fleet of foot, switching tasks as the occasion has demanded. While relatively small in scale, they have always had a catalytic effect. Our involvement in testing is a case in point. We deployed personnel to the city of Liverpool to support the first whole-town community mass testing pilot. The lessons learned along the way are now being applied in testing across the country, from Medway in Kent to Merthyr Tydfil, Kirkcaldy, Lancashire and Greater Manchester. Only recently, I authorised the deployment of 800 personnel in Greater Manchester. Yesterday they began focused community testing.

The country is of course eager to see the roll-out of the largest vaccination programme in British history and the NHS is delivering vaccines to those who need it them at unprecedented speed. Defence's contribution has once again been primarily through planning support provided by Defence logisticians applying their expertise

[Mr Ben Wallace]

in building supply chains at speed in complex environments. As Brigadier Phil Prosser, Commander 101 Logistic Brigade, said in the No. 10 press conference last week, this operation is

“unparalleled in its scale and complexity”.

As that operation has shifted from planning to execution and is now focusing on rapidly scaling up, Defence has been preparing to adapt its support to the NHS. Not only have we sent additional military planners to assist expansion, including in the devolved Administrations, but, following a request from the Department of Health and Social Care, we have established a vaccine quick reaction force of medically trained personnel who are assigned to the seven NHS England regions. They can be deployed at short notice in the event of any disruptions to the established vaccination process and can be scaled up, if required, by any of the national health services across the United Kingdom.

Throughout the pandemic, understanding the requirement has been Defence’s priority, in order to tailor-make the most appropriate support. That is why we have sent 10 military assessment teams to each of the 10 NHS regions and devolved Administrations. They are helping to assess the situation on the ground before formulating and co-ordinating the most effective response. For example, we currently have experts working at the newly reopened NHS London Nightingale, a hospital and mass vaccination facility that will help the capital handle covid-19’s second wave.

Defence’s efforts have often been very visible, such as providing critical support to our overseas territories. Just last weekend, the Royal Air Force delivered more than 5,000 doses of the Pfizer vaccine to British citizens in Gibraltar. We should not neglect our armed forces that are less visible, because their contribution is no less important.

Our planners are now embedded in local authorities, working alongside the regional liaison officers, providing critical command and control and logistics support. They know how to deal with deadly diseases such as Ebola and how to stay calm under pressure. Those cool heads have been pivotal, not just in co-ordinating efforts, but in assessing how and where defence personnel can deliver the best response.

I have mentioned the personnel we have deployed or that are held at high readiness, but the real number helping the nation to combat the coronavirus is far greater. We have in excess of 5,000 armed forces personnel and civilian staff supporting the covid response from behind the scenes, as part of their routine duties. Today, I want to pay tribute to those men and women. They include the hundreds of personnel in Defence headquarters responsible for co-ordinating the covid support force. Among them are 100 staff of the MOD’s winter operations cell, a similar number working on covid planning at Standing Joint Command, and 100 more facilitating covid operations as part of their regular jobs in the joint military commands. From the Defence Medical Services, we must not forget that we have more than 1,600 consultants, clinicians, nurses and trainees fully embedded in the NHS all over the United Kingdom and, as ever, they are working alongside their civilian counterparts, some of whom are also military reservists. At our globally renowned Defence Science and Technology Laboratory—DSTL—there are 180 scientists and

technicians working across 30 different covid-related projects, supporting the Government’s scientific understanding. Meanwhile, our expert analysts in Defence Intelligence have studied how covid-19 spreads, and our procurement specialists have been busily supporting the acquisition of unprecedented quantities of personal protective equipment.

This has been a truly national and whole-force response, uniting regulars and reservists, soldiers and academics, sailors and civil servants, some of whom the Prime Minister met yesterday when visiting the Ashton Gate mass vaccination centre in Bristol. Yet, even as we respond to the pandemic, we must maintain our day job of guarding the nation from dangers at home and abroad. Despite the virus, troops continue to manage wider winter tasks such as flood protection, counter-terrorism and the EU transition. We have maintained our momentum in operations critical to security, whether striking terrorists in Iraq, deterring Russian aggression in the Baltics, supporting UN peacekeeping in Mali or maintaining our continuous at-sea deterrent. It goes without saying that the safety and welfare of our people is paramount. I can reassure the House that we have rigorous and robust measures in place to protect our personnel and to reduce risk to themselves and their families while carrying out their duties.

Let me assure the House that our armed forces remain resilient and ready to support the NHS and colleagues across all Government Departments. Now as ever, come what may, they stand ready to do their duty—however, wherever and whenever they are needed. I know that some colleagues are keen to see the armed forces take a more leading role, but I should make it clear that our constitution quite rightly ensures that our military responds to civilian requests for assistance. They act in support of the civilian authorities, but are always ready to consider what more they can do to provide that support. Together, we will do our bit to beat this deadly disease and help our nation get back to normality.

2.2 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for giving me advance sight of his statement and I welcome this direct update to the House. This is a chance for us all to thank and pay tribute to the 5,000 forces personnel, both regulars and reservists, who are currently providing covid assistance, and to the leadership from Standing Joint Command under Lieutenant General Urch. The Labour leader and I saw at first hand in November the professionalism and commitment that the team at Aldershot bring to this task. The public also welcome the important contribution our armed forces are making to help the country through the continuing covid crisis, from troops on the frontline building Nightingale hospitals, community testing or driving ambulances and tankers, to the planners, analysts and scientists behind the scenes. The military is an essential element of our British national resilience, and people can see this more clearly now than perhaps at any time since the end of national service. I trust that this will reinforce public support for our armed forces and help to redefine a closer relationship between the military and civilian society.

However, I detect a sense of frustration from the Secretary of State in his statement. The Government have been too slow to act at every stage of the pandemic, and too slow to make the fullest use of the armed

forces, as I and others on both sides of the House have argued since the summer. During the first lockdown, the covid support force was 20,000 strong, yet fewer than 4,000 were deployed. The winter support force numbers 14,000, yet now, even with what the Secretary of State calls

“the most significant domestic operation in peacetime”,

just 5,000 are being used, with only 56 military aid requests currently in place. How many of the 14,000 troops does the Secretary of State expect to be deployed by the end of the month, as we confront the gravest period of this pandemic to date?

On vaccinations, it is very welcome that from this week the armed forces are finally being used to help deliver the nation’s No. 1 priority, the national vaccination programme. The Secretary of State has said that 250 teams of medical personnel are on stand-by, and yet only one in 10 is set to be posted this week to the seven NHS regions in England. When will they all be deployed and working to get vaccines into people’s arms? We in Labour are proud that Britain was the first country in the world to get the vaccine, and we want Britain to be the first to complete the vaccinations. We want the Government to succeed. Does the Secretary of State accept that military medical teams can do much more to help?

On testing, we also welcome the work being done across the UK to reinforce community testing, from Kirklees to Kent and in the devolved Administrations. Fifteen hundred personnel had also been provided to support schools with covid testing. Now that schools have moved to online teaching, what changes are being made to those plans? When infection rates come down, testing will again be vital to control the virus. Yet the £22 billion NHS Track and Trace service is still failing to do the necessary job. There is no military aid agreement in place for Test and Trace, so may I suggest that the Secretary of State offers military help to get the outfit sorted out?

Finally, I turn to service personnel themselves. MOD figures confirm that the average number of tests for defence personnel since April has been just 1,900 a week. With 5,000 troops now deployed on covid tasks in the UK and more on essential operations or training overseas, what system is in place to ensure that those personnel are tested regularly, and what plans does the Secretary of State have to ensure that they are also properly vaccinated?

The challenge of covid to this country is unprecedented. Yesterday, the chief medical officer said that we are “facing the most dangerous situation anyone can remember”, so, if the Secretary of State seeks to expand the role of the military in defeating this virus, he should know that he will have our full support.

Mr Wallace: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his questions. First, on the issue of military willingness to engage, he knows we are of course incredibly keen and eager to offer whatever assistance we can. I will address his questions on the range of those subjects one by one.

One of the reasons why we invest in people as planners in the heart of Departments and local government is to ensure that we shape that ask as it develops and to ensure that we are dealing in the art of the possible, as

well as with realistic deployment requests. Sometimes we get initial requests for thousands of people, but once we scale it down and work through what is required, it ends up being a couple of hundred.

That has been partly because some of the Departments or local authorities are not used to MACA. Funnily enough, Departments used to using MACAs, as indeed local government or the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government would be—local authorities that have had significant flooding in their time—will be used to that relationship, but for others this is a new experience.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about the scale between the designated force and the force actually used. He is right to say that 20,000 were earmarked for the covid response at the beginning and that 4,000 to 5,000 were deployed. That was at any one time. As he knows, our forces work 24 hours a day, seven days a week, so we rotate many of those personnel through. Right now, 5,000 might be deployed at any one time, but people will be earmarked to become much more ready—in a higher state of readiness.

To be at 24-hour readiness, or ready within a few hours, places a huge demand on anyone—in effect, to be sitting in your house or barracks waiting to be deployed—so we rotate the forces through the different readiness stages. One stage might be to be ready to move in 24 hours, one might be with three days’ notice or one might be with one week’s notice. Those different readiness stages mean that they can either get on and do their day job, or basically just stand and wait. Therefore, of a force of about 14,000 who are currently earmarked, yes, we have 5,000 today, but I suspect that by the time we have got through this phase—if all demands remain the same—somewhere between 10,000 to 12,000 of those 14,000 personnel will have been used at some stage on the covid response. The 5,000 who are on today will come off, get a period of rest and build-up time with their families, and then come back again. The force has a fixed amount in terms of where we draw the different readinesses, but the deployments are drawn through that process. Of course, all armed forces personnel are able—“available” would probably be the wrong word—to help the Government in their resilience and defence; that is obviously the purpose of their job.

We have over 100 people in the planning process for the vaccination roll-out across the whole United Kingdom: in Scotland, Wales, England and Northern Ireland. We also currently have 21 quick reaction vaccination teams, who are usually staffed by a doctor, some combat medics and nurses. Their job, in a team of six, is to deploy as required. We are holding 229 teams in reserve, should we wish to deploy all 250. The limiting factors at the moment will be the delivery schedule and timetable of the vaccines themselves; of course I could deploy 100,000 soldiers tomorrow, ready to vaccinate, but if the stock is not there, we would be better off deploying them in other ways.

The Government are very keen, and the Prime Minister is determined, to ensure that we match the pace of stock delivery with the pace of delivery into people’s arms—the jabbing. We are very clear that we can do more to assist. The Prime Minister knows that and has indicated that we will be called on as the NHS requires, but we should not forget that the NHS is also recruiting tens of thousands

[Mr Wallace]

of volunteers, former clinicians and former nurses who are able to do the vaccinations; it is not a purely military response.

In answer to the right hon. Gentleman's question on testing and tracing, we have had a one-star within the organisation of test and trace from very early on. We originally earmarked 1,500 personnel for schools testing. We have reduced that to about 800, who stand by to help not only where needed in the schools that are currently taking key workers' children, but also with talking to people, through webinars and other remote methods, about how to administer lateral flow tests. We stand ready to do more if required. We have scaled the number of personnel down slightly simply because of the school closures, but we stand ready to increase that number if required.

Let me turn to the personnel themselves. When they deploy on a MACA task, such as the 800 personnel deployed to Manchester, they will be tested before they go and throughout the process. They will abide by whatever the current NHS guidelines are: if they feel ill, they should get a test; and if we feel that they are going in front of people who are vulnerable, we will also take steps to test them. If people test positive, they are very quickly isolated. I can get the latest figures for the House, if that helps. The lateral flow tests have opened up a huge amount of much more easily accessible testing to do that.

I am grateful for the right hon. Member's support of our Defence. I assure him that both the Prime Minister and I are determined to lean into this problem, and to maximise our efforts wherever we can. Wherever we see an opportunity, instead of waiting for an argument about who does what, we offer to do it. That is why only recently the House will have seen us fly out those vaccines to Gibraltar. We put them on a plane, get them out there and get it done. We can have all the arguments we want after the fact; let us get on with it. We are all—I know this includes the loyal Opposition—united in working to help deliver this. Defence is doing its bit, but we should not forget that it is doing its bit alongside the amazing people of the NHS, who are on the frontline in their tens of thousands, day in, day out.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. We have one hour put aside for this statement, which I can extend slightly, but not by too much, so I ask colleagues to ask brief, succinct questions and to provide fairly brief answers.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con) [V]: Madam Deputy Speaker, you will know that I have not always been uncritical of the test and trace process, but I believe in giving credit where credit is due. Yesterday, a member of my team had occasion to take a covid-19 test at the Birchington-on-Sea village centre in North Thanet. That centre was staffed by soldiers of the Gurkha regiment. Those attending report that their conduct was exemplary, they were courteous, patient and efficient, and the test results were recorded in short order. Will my right hon. Friend convey my thanks on behalf of my constituents to Brigadier Phil Prosser for all the work that these and thousands of men and women in the armed forces like them are doing in the war against the pandemic?

Mr Wallace: My right hon. Friend is very kind to say what he said about the efforts in Kent. We have 360 personnel supporting Kent County Council with lateral flow testing, and he will have seen that considerable number in the problems over Christmas. I will pass on his thanks to Brigadier Prosser, but of course, Brigadier Prosser is the lead on the vaccine. We have a number of other senior military personnel leading in different areas, including test and trace and building NHS capacity; Brigadier Lizzie Faithfull-Davies is the lady in charge of the military response on that. What is amazing is that these military personnel joined to be soldiers and to be Navy, and they do what they are doing today with the same professionalism and enthusiasm as they would do their day job. That is a tribute to the training and the quality of personnel, including, of course, the Gurkha regiment to which my right hon. Friend refers.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP) [V]: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. It was only right that he took the time to outline all those within the defence community, whether on the frontline or not, who are working so hard and so professionally to get us through the pandemic. On behalf of my party, I thank each and every one of them for the work that they have done. Because of their professionalism and the way in which they have carried out their job, the Secretary of State comes to the House with a good story to tell today.

I want to press the Secretary of State on two issues, starting with vaccinations. Could he adumbrate exactly where those in defence who are working on covid stand in the queue for receiving vaccinations? Can he give us an idea of how many have been vaccinated so far?

My second question is much broader, and it concerns the issue of resilience, which the Secretary of State knows I am keen on. If we are to do resilience properly, it cannot just be the preserve of the Ministry of Defence; I know he understands that. Can he tell us how the pandemic and the lessons from it as far as resilience is concerned will be reflected in the integrated review? If he can go one further and tell us when that might be published, I will even buy him a dram when we are next allowed to.

Mr Wallace: I think I should go for the easy one: the current target date for the IR is the first two weeks of February, so we will go for a half on that. None of our defence personnel has received a vaccination; they are not in priority groups one to four. However, we are, as we speak, working out which key cohorts should be vaccinated in order to preserve and underline the nation's defence. Obviously, they will get priority, but I expect it to be a small group at first, because protecting priority groups one to four is important.

In terms of resilience, one of the lessons is on reserves. The Scottish Government are empowered to create an NHS reserve if they wish to. That will be one of the lessons that we will draw in England and Wales. We use military reserves, but other Departments may start considering that as well, for those people who want to contribute to the reserve and the resilience of the nation. I am sure that the Scottish Government, under the devolved powers, are entitled to look at that, and I would definitely recommend it.

For the hon. Gentleman's peace of mind, there are currently three personnel working in airlift—CASEVAC—in the Scottish Ambulance Service, 32 planners in the region to support community testing and vaccination deployment, and 25 planners in the Scottish Government and NHS Scotland helping work through those problems. Of course, we stand ready for more. If more is requested through the Scottish Government, we stand ready to provide that assistance, to make sure that the whole of the British Isles and the United Kingdom get through this issue.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con) [V]: First, let me join the Secretary of State in thanking all the military personnel involved, in every way, for all they have done in this national effort. They are always ready to step up to the mark. Will he also acknowledge the huge contribution being made by St John Ambulance, which is training up to 30,000 volunteers, to the highest standard, to be vaccinators? Will he ensure that military planners and those on the ground work hand in hand with St John Ambulance, the Red Cross and the Royal Voluntary Service to maximise the contribution they can make?

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point. Volunteers need managing, and although St John Ambulance is a disciplined uniform service, the huge member of people being recruited to volunteer will need managing. That is certainly one of the areas where we think the military can assist the NHS, in terms of how we manage lots of volunteers to deliver at a productive and efficient rate things such as the vaccine. That is where we will find the military working hand in hand with others. It is another example of this not being just about the frontline or the front trench; often the skill we can bring is in looking after 200,000 or 50,000 volunteers and making sure they are used correctly, in the right part of the system. St John Ambulance will be able to deliver a very efficient group of volunteers, because that is its business and we look forward to working with it.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD) [V]: May I, too, express my sincere thanks to our United Kingdom armed forces for all that they have done? My vast and faraway constituency presents special challenges: the remoteness of where people live; an ageing population, which is statistically rather different from that of the rest of the UK; and the distance people might have to travel from far corners of my constituency to Inverness or Wick to be vaccinated. I hope that the quick reaction teams the Secretary of State refers to will be involved in helping my constituents to be vaccinated. Will he remind the Scottish Government that they are there to help and that, working together, we can give my constituents the security they need?

Mr Wallace: The hon. Gentleman knows that I know his part of the world very well, having represented Aberdeenshire, in North East Scotland, in the Scottish Parliament with him 21 years ago. He reminded me of that the other day—I had hair then! This is why at the beginning of this we deployed helicopters up to Kinloss to make sure we look after the highlands and islands, and we stand ready to do that. Notwithstanding the fact that we have planners in the Scottish Government to help, we have not received a MACA request for the use of some of these quick reaction vaccine teams, but

they are there for the taking if they are asked for; I am happy to support and sign off any such request. Obviously, some of the vaccine is coming from abroad and we need to distribute it to the fingertips of the UK.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I wish to remind Members that we are halfway through the allocated time and we have got through only five people. May I therefore press colleagues to ask short, concise questions?

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con) [V]: Will my right hon. Friend confirm that his Department is working with the Department for Education to ensure that schools that must remain open, especially those in Rother Valley, have the support, guidance and materials they need to offer rapid testing to their staff and students over the coming weeks?

Mr Wallace: Yes. Although we had originally earmarked 1,500, we have scaled that down to 750 personnel ready to assist schools. Currently, we have deployed 84 to assist 52 schools and colleges, and they stand by all over Wales and England if that help is needed. If the Welsh Government request that support, we will be able to both provide support physically and help online to make sure that the staff can deliver the lateral flow testing.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP) [V]: It is tremendous to hear that the armed forces are playing their part in the roll-out of the vaccine across Great Britain and we thank them for that. However, the one part of the United Kingdom that seems to be proceeding without the same level of military assistance is Northern Ireland. If this continues to be the case, we will be missing the opportunity to alleviate critical pressures on hospitals, to speed up the roll-out of the vaccine and to lift the burden on GP services to both roll out the vaccine and keep general practice services functioning at the same time. Can the Secretary of State confirm that the MOD is ready and willing to accede to any request for support from the Northern Ireland Executive and whether such a request has been made by the Health Minister for Northern Ireland?

Mr Wallace: The hon. Lady will remember that, at the beginning, we did indeed devolve military assets to CASEVAC patients who were ill to England. Indeed, we had earmarked and agreed a MACA request for the use of defence estate at Kinnegar and Aldergrove at the time. We do have support, and have been preparing support, to allow NHS staff to refocus or to be released on to the frontline. We are awaiting that MACA request; we believe that there is one inbound. We will obviously accept any request and look at it on its merits, but from the point of view of the MOD, and of the UK Government, there is no specific bias towards any part of the United Kingdom. As the requests come in from the civilian authorities of the devolved Administrations, we are ready, willing and able to meet them.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con) [V]: Will my right hon. Friend assure me that the critical task of the defence of our nation and our commitment to NATO operations and exercises are not being compromised in order to provide this support?

Mr Wallace: Our critical defence tasks are being maintained. At the beginning of December, I visited Estonia to see our forward presence, which is working alongside the Estonians. Our continuous at-sea deterrent is just that—it is continuous, as indeed are our air policing and our Navy deployments. We have not taken our eye off the ball when it comes to defending the nation, but at the same time this shows the importance of concurrent activity and resilience in being able to deliver other tasks that were definitely unforeseen a few years ago.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab) [V]: May I join the Secretary of State in thanking members of our armed forces for their work during this pandemic? I also thank MOD civil servants and those working at the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory. The Government are quite rightly prioritising those most at risk in the vaccine roll-out, but what discussions has the Secretary of State had with the Department of Health and Social Care about rolling out the vaccine among our defence personnel who are working on defence-critical missions, such as maintaining our continuous at-sea deterrent?

Mr Wallace: As I said in reply to an earlier question, we have discussed this with the NHS. We are working on a list right now of who we can prioritise to make sure that we underpin the very important defence tasks. Core things such as the continuous at-sea deterrent will be included in those discussions. It is vital that it remains continuous. Also, as we go through priorities one to four and further down into the vaccine programme, we will consider key industries and key people who will help keep the country and defence going.

May I just echo what the right hon. Gentleman said? We often focus on the men and women in uniform, but defence is more than that. It is the scientists, the civil servants, the logisticians, the reserves and often the retired community and the veterans as well. I want to pay tribute to them, because they have been just as important in a large part of this process. I feel for the civil servants in the MOD, who can often get slightly forgotten in the narrative, but that does not mean to say that we forget them in the reality. They have been doing an amazing job as well. My civil servants have been working alongside our military personnel throughout this process.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con) [V]: The entire nation should be grateful for the adaptability of our armed forces, whether it be for the rapid building of the Nightingale hospitals, the roll-out of personal protective equipment, or help with track and trace. As we build up with vaccine deliveries the unprecedented task of vaccinating the majority of the nation, can my right hon. Friend set out what role the armed forces will play in that huge task?

Mr Wallace: As I have said right from the beginning, we are involved with the vaccine taskforce, making sure that we are on the frontline so that we can jump in and fill any gaps that emerge. We have set up a quick reaction force. Up to 250 people, and more if required, will be able to go out and take vaccines to people if that stock needs to be delivered. That could deliver a significant uplift in the numbers of people being injected. At the same time, we have people embedded in the regional

vaccine offices of the NHS, where the NHS is planning how it will deliver the vaccine in the regions and, indeed, in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, to make sure that, wherever there is a gap, the MOD will try to fill it.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab) [V]: Like so many, I am extremely proud to see our dedicated servicemen and women supporting the national effort to overcome the public health crisis. The overwhelming majority of Britons now see disease prevention as an issue of national security, so will the Secretary of State tell us how coronavirus is shaping the forthcoming integrated review?

Mr Wallace: From a defence point of view—indeed, I know this from my own background as the Minister for Security—resilience was key to the integrated review. I felt it was important that the integrated view should be used to enhance the use of reserves. Reserves will be part of the long-term future of this nation's resilience—whether they are civilian reserves in an NHS environment or, indeed, from the armed forces, they are going to be very important. We need to look at how we employ our people to make sure that there is a flow between regulars and reserves and that they are used in a much better way.

In addition to that, we have seen the threat of silent or sub-threshold enemies—disinformation. We have already seen Russia deploy smears, innuendos and disinformation against our Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine, at the same time as elements trying to steal secrets through cyber. That is an important example of how we have to be on our guard when our adversaries take advantage of natural disasters or natural phenomena. We have deployed and used the 77th Brigade throughout this process to challenge disinformation, which is obviously an appropriate use of that brigade. When a foreign country makes something up, spreads a rumour and tries to undermine us, we should challenge that.

All those policies are being proved in this pandemic. Members will see front and centre in the integrated review that resilience is one of the main things on which we must always focus if we are to defend the nation.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con) [V]: This is undoubtedly the greatest national emergency of my lifetime, yet only a small fraction of the available military capacity has been called upon by the rest of the Government—and that is despite the fact that the test and trace operations have been indifferent in performance and the vaccine programme seems to be almost entirely dependent on civilian capability that is tested every winter in the best of circumstances. Why does my right hon. Friend think that the Government, or perhaps the rest of the Government, are so confident that civilian organisations are capable of delivering these incredible tasks of such scale, magnitude, importance and urgency without significantly more military capacity, particularly in respect of four-star military capability at the top of these organisations, rather than just one-star?

Mr Wallace: I assure my hon. Friend that the four-stars and three-stars are equally busy. I just came from a meeting with a three-star and a four-star on the vaccines and the need to make sure that we are leaning in as much as possible. I understand what my hon. Friend says but, fundamentally, the armed forces have been

making a difference. If there was more demand or, indeed, an easy way to deliver the solution to this pandemic, we would have been doing that.

It is not the case, when we talk about numbers in the armed forces, that they are sitting around not doing anything until they are called. My hon. Friend recently called for more assistance for the NHS in Essex. I looked at a number of requests that came in last week and the week before, and it was quite sobering to realise that of the 1,600 clinicians, senior nurses and nurses in the armed forces as regulars, they are all deployed—they are all working in hospitals in Middlesbrough, in the south-west, in Birmingham and in the south-east. They are all there, because even in peacetime—even when we are not fighting a pandemic—instead of having them sitting around, we make sure that they are working in the NHS and augmenting that time. In respect of some of the requests, we are in danger of robbing Peter to pay Paul: I would simply be taking clinicians out of one hospital trust to move them to another one. That is not going to solve the challenge that we have.

I understand what my hon. Friend says and can give him the assurance that I gave to the Labour defence spokesman, the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey): we stand ready to do it. It is not like we sit in our rooms waiting for a phone call; we push and, sometimes to the annoyance of some of my colleagues, I push and push and agitate—I am quite a good agitator—to make sure that we try and deliver wherever we can. The Prime Minister is absolutely open to all ideas and we deliver on many occasions.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP) [V]: The armed forces have played a prominent role in supporting frontline public health services in Scotland, and their support has been welcome. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with devolved officials prior to this further commitment of military personnel, and what discussions has he had since to ensure effective targeted allocations of personnel within communities and vaccination sites in Scotland?

Mr Wallace: I have not had numerous discussions with my Scottish counterparts because I took the decision at the beginning of this outbreak to devolve my authority and the asset to the professionals whom we have embedded in both local authorities and Ministries in the devolved Administrations so that they can just get on with their jobs uninterrupted. My military planners are sitting in Scotland with the Scottish Government and with the NHS, and the only barrier to them being used more is whether the Scottish Government choose to use the assets that are available. It is entirely up to the First Minister of Scotland whether she wishes to use more British military assets. I do not get in the way of it and I do not need phone calls with her; she has those people at her disposal. If the hon. Lady would like us to do more—she said a few months ago on Twitter that we should do more—I would suggest she raises it with the First Minister of Scotland.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con) [V]: Although our service personnel are already making a fine contribution, has my right hon. Friend examined which aspects of Israel's efficient and highly successful vaccination programme involving her armed forces might be applicable to our own use of military medical resources?

Mr Wallace: One of the lessons—a bit like when the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) asked about lessons from the integrated review—is that Israel, like a number of European countries, has huge numbers of reserves or reservists. Slovakia or Slovenia, I think, almost mobilised its whole 3 million or millions of people, and Israel is very deep on reserves. I think, first, Israel has been able to mobilise people through its reserve capability, and I think that is one of the lessons; and, secondly, there is the element of 24 hours a day, seven days a week: how much more can we do, and how much more assistance can we squeeze into a day? That conversation is very live right now between me, the Department of Health and the Prime Minister. If we can do it, we will do it. I think, at the moment, the limiting factor is just simply the stock coming in, but as the stock of actual jabs picks up, I would expect us to push more and more on that or, indeed, to take the jabs to people.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab) [V]: Hospitals in several parts of the country are reporting concerns about oxygen supplies. Has the Secretary of State had discussions with the Department of Health and Social Care about the provision of armed forces support with oxygen supply logistics to ensure that oxygen is available for every patient who needs it?

Mr Wallace: Yes, right from the very start our drivers have augmented oxygen delivery around the United Kingdom, or certainly England and Wales. We continue to do that, and I think we have a number of personnel actually doing that right now. If there is more required, we will do it, and if we have to go and find more oxygen, we will go and help with that logistic chain. For Brigadier Prosser from 101 Logistic Brigade, one of the tasks of the Logistic Brigade is to help in areas such as oxygen supply.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): Local authorities in Lancashire continue to benefit from the invaluable support our armed forces are providing in relation to mass testing programmes. However, I understand the existing deployment is due to be scaled down over the next few weeks, a decision that was taken before local infection rates started to rise once again. In the light of recent events, will my right hon. Friend consider extending the current deployment so that all local authorities in Lancashire, including those on the Fylde coast, can continue to benefit from this invaluable resource?

Mr Wallace: I have visited the north-west regional response and spoken to the Lancashire leaders and then the Greater Manchester leaders and the Mayor, Andy Burnham, on a whole range of these things. This is not due to be drawn down other than in that, as on many MACAs, we put a time limit on it to make sure we examine whether it should continue or whether we need to modify it and learn lessons. We will do whatever is required in Lancashire and the north-west to deliver an improved test and trace to make sure that we are taking the testing to the very people we want to find—where the infection is—because if we can find people with no symptoms but who are infected moving around the community and we can isolate them, then we can really help slow the spread down. At the same time, as my hon. Friend will know, one of the sites for vaccinations has opened in Blackpool, making sure that vaccination goes hand in hand with the testing.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab) [V]: I commend our wonderful armed forces personnel for continually putting their shoulder to the wheel in the midst of a national crisis. The mass vaccination centres require not just medical staff but logistical, clerical and steward staff to manage the huge flows of people every day. Does the Secretary of State agree that armed forces personnel could and should play a more significant role in providing those services, so that vaccination centres in local communities such as Slough and the roll-out mobile vaccination units have the resources that they need?

Mr Wallace: The hon. Member is right: it is not just the clinical touch. A vaccination process can take about 25 minutes. The actual time that someone is in front of a person with a needle and injected is three or four minutes; the rest of the time can be stewarding, keeping an eye on people and ensuring that they find the right places to go. His question is timely, because right now we are having a discussion with the vaccine taskforce and the NHS about how we can augment that to ensure that nurses and clinicians focus entirely on the clinical part and therefore the throughput can increase. We can help with such things as stewarding and, I suspect, marshalling all the volunteers.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con) [V]: My constituent Dr Sheila Fitzpatrick contacted me yesterday about her application to get into the process to be a volunteer vaccinator. She used the phrase: this

“needs the intervention of the military”.

I am sure she will have been pleased with my right hon. Friend’s statement, but can he explain how Army logistics can be used to ensure that those volunteering end up in the right place?

Mr Wallace: I am tempted to say that a good sergeant major will be able to fix a lot of that. It goes to the point that I made earlier: volunteers need managing and we need to work out their needs. Because they are volunteers we may be unable to lean on them as much to do the same number of hours. Also, we need to ensure that we match troops to task, as we call it, ensuring that the skillset is in the right place. The hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) asked the same sort of question. What we are doing at the moment with the NHS is discussing exactly how we can increase and augment that, because our skillset is often just that. The sergeant major will ensure that people are in the right place, at the right time, doing the right thing. I never said no to my sergeant major.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC) [V]: I welcome the support of the military in the vaccine roll-out. I have a particular concern about delivery in rural areas. Can the Secretary of State reassure me that there is military capacity available, perhaps in the reserves, to operate in extreme conditions—for example in heavy snow in rural and, indeed, mountainous areas?

Mr Wallace: Yes. First, we have 100 personnel supporting the Welsh ambulance service and 92 personnel supporting the Welsh Government on the Welsh vaccination roll-out. Of course, one of the benefits of both the vaccine quick reaction forces and, indeed, the military personnel is that most of us did our training up in the hills of

Brecon and Sennybridge and areas such as that, and are used to adverse weather. It is also why we are equipped to deal with it. That is one of the strengths and, I hope, one of the opportunities that the Welsh Government will take advantage of, if needed, to go down to rural communities, down the small tracks and to the hill farmers, to ensure that they get the vaccinations and the support that they need.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con) [V]: Will my right hon. Friend please join me in thanking our wonderful armed forces, particularly those based at Kendrew barracks in Rutland, who the Minister for the Armed Forces visited this week to see their vital contribution to defeating covid first hand? Following misinformation this week in Rutland and Melton, can my right hon. Friend please confirm that the military are not deployed anywhere in our country to enforce or police covid restrictions?

Mr Wallace: The military’s response is a response to help civilian authorities meet requirements. We have made it clear that enforcement is not our job. Our job is to help the police, backfilling to help to free up the police should they need to do more on the streets. Our main job is logistics, planning, mass—for example, for mass testing—and things such as helping to deliver the vaccines with our specialists.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab) [V]: The Secretary of State has rightly praised the armed forces and referred several times to reservists and the work that they have done, especially in dealing with testing at the border with France before Christmas and over the new year period. In that vein, will he reconsider his decision—and, indeed, reverse it—to cut the number of training days for reservists, as they are clearly hugely important to our response to the pandemic?

Mr Wallace: The hon. Gentleman will know, first, that training days may not necessarily align with the covid task and, secondly, that we have a budget to which we are obliged. There are significant pressures on the budget, and the record settlement that we have does not begin until next year. What we did not do was cut reserves—we cut down on some reserves days in this financial year. That does not take away from the future; it just means that we had to meet some of the financial pressures across the board. It is not the only measure that we took. It is a significant pressure, and that is why the record settlement that kicks in next year will help us to make sure that we have a much more holistic approach and a more sustainable deployment of our armed forces.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): As supplies of the vaccine expand over the days to come, are the military ready to step up their participation in getting vaccinations out, particularly to our frail elderly so that they can have not only the first but the second dose and are protected from this terrible virus?

Mr Wallace: My right hon. Friend should be reassured. I have come from a meeting on exactly that: making sure that as the delivery profile of the vaccines increases there is no gap in delivery. If there is, we are designed, ready and standing by to assist in delivery and, in fact, getting ahead. One of the things about which a number of Members have asked are lessons from the integrated

review: anticipation, better planning, longer planning, and making sure that we know what is coming next. Those are some of our strengths, and that is something that we can export to other Government Departments, and on the vaccines we are right at the centre of trying to do that.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab) [V]: I share the admiration for our armed forces that many hon. Members have highlighted, and I share frustration that the Defence Secretary and other hon. Members have expressed about the fact that many people allocated by his Department are not being utilised by the Government. Can he tell us whether there are other barriers that have prevented Government Departments from taking up this opportunity, such as accommodation or other budgetary concerns? He can be assured that in Chesterfield we have many hotels that would be happy to accommodate members of the armed forces if they can help us to speed up the vaccination programme.

Mr Wallace: First, I can assure the hon. Gentleman that when we deploy our armed forces we do our best to make sure that we are in the community. Many armed forces are helping in Greater Manchester and have been deployed in many hotels in the area. My experience over almost the past year has been that the driver for demand is often not as straightforward as people think. It is not a question of Secretaries of State picking up the phone and saying, “I want to send thousands of people there.” Demand is often driven from the ground up. It is often driven by local authorities or regional leaders, alongside regional NHS demand. That is what we have to remember. There are plenty of places that have managed within their own resources to deliver, but the trick is to make sure that we anticipate. As I said in an earlier answer, I think three or four months ahead. Historically, I do not think that most civilian Departments do so, and that is what the pandemic has taught us all: to think what is next. As soon as we solve today’s problem we should move on to think about the next one.

On our response, for example, we said almost immediately to Ty Urch, the general in charge of the response, whom I congratulate on being knighted in the honours list: “You go back to the main job and the deputy will be the main liaison.” That is what we do well. There are no barriers to these requests and no barriers from other Departments either. Demand is being generated either from the ground up or from other Departments. That is when we see less or more, depending on what is required.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con) [V]: Across the UK, our armed forces are helping to fight this invisible and deadly enemy by supporting covid-19 testing. Led by Group Captain Andy Turk, personnel from RAF Valley in my constituency have been assisting local authorities in Manchester and Derbyshire. Our forces are doing so much for us during this pandemic, alongside their critical defence work, so can my right hon. Friend confirm when and how the vaccination programme will be rolled out to them?

Mr Wallace: The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation issued advice on priority groups for covid on 2 December. Prioritisation was governed by evidence on the risk of increased death rates from severe illness rather than occupational roles. With the exception of Defence Medical Services—frontline healthcare

workers who are engaged in patient care for those with specific vulnerabilities—the majority of defence people are not expected to be included in the initial roll-out. However, as I said earlier, we are working with the rest of Government to try to make sure that people who have key defence tasks are given priority at some stage after the first cohorts have had their vaccinations.

I pay tribute to the men and women of the RAF at Valley. They have done an amazing job, and not only out of area in Derbyshire and so on where they have been helping. That shows that this effort is not just about the Army. Yesterday the Prime Minister met members of the Navy involved in the vaccinations, and the RAF has been helping in landlocked Derbyshire as well. That shows that this is a multi-domain, multi-service effort.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I join the Secretary of State in paying tribute to the work of our military personnel—the frontline in this crisis—but what is their role, and that of Ministers, in setting the direction? How often does Cobra meet, and do they attend? He mentioned the constraint in stocks of vaccines. Is that not now the crux of the matter? What is holding us back, and what is being done about it?

Mr Wallace: First, we are not being held back. I think we have injected more people than anywhere in Europe—in fact, not so long ago, it was more than in the whole of Europe put together. We are almost in the lead on the number of people being injected, on a like-for-like basis. Nothing is being held back. The Government have placed the orders for enough vaccines for all of us over the period. At the same time, we are absolutely keen to step up to the plate to make sure that we get ahead of the problem, if there is a problem, and to deliver so that we do not have a problem. That is what we are doing right now. I am confident that we will get there. I agitate most days to make sure that we are in the room, and we are in the room. My hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces attends Covid-O—effectively the standing Cobra for covid response—almost twice weekly, if not more. We are always engaged in making sure that there is a planned Government solution to this problem.

Fay Jones (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con) [V]: I declare an interest as my partner is currently on operational deployment overseas with the Army. Closer to home, I want to thank Brigadier Andrew Dawes, the head of the Army in Wales, who has supported both the Welsh and UK Governments during the covid pandemic. From his base at the barracks in Brecon, he and his team have helped to crew ambulances and co-ordinate mass testing, and have now established a vaccination support force. Will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking Brigadier Dawes and all the staff at the barracks for their immense hard work? Given the operational significance of the barracks, will he also commit to reconsidering the future of the headquarters of the Army in Wales?

Mr Wallace: First, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend’s husband, who is doing the other part of the defence task, which is getting on and keeping our country safe at the same time as the rest of our armed forces are engaged in covid. I understand the concerns around the Brecon barracks and indeed the current headquarters of the Army in Wales. I know that my hon. Friend the

[Mr Wallace]

Minister for Defence Procurement has been to visit. There will be an announcement shortly on the future of that location.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP) [V]: My constituency has traditionally provided significant numbers of recruits, particularly to the Army. Whether these soldiers are on the frontline against a military threat or a deadly virus, they deserve the best equipment we can provide. However, recent TV footage would seem to suggest that soldiers on frontline anti-covid duties are wearing what looks to the layperson to be pretty basic protective equipment. Can the Secretary of State confirm that all military personnel working in potentially covid-hazardous environments will be provided with protective equipment to the standards recommended by the relevant public health authorities?

Mr Wallace: Yes, all military personnel should be wearing, and be equipped with, PPE in line with the standards put out by the public health authorities. I know the hon. Gentleman's constituency well—there is a defence industrial base there—and I know that part of Scotland well, and I know that not only do they deserve the best but that they deserve the support of the whole United Kingdom, to which the Scottish regiments make an important contribution.

Craig Williams (Montgomeryshire) (Con): I thank the armed forces for their work in standing up to support the Welsh Ambulance Services NHS Trust, and for the planning and logistical support. As the Secretary of State mentioned, the training happens in the local authority of Powys, in which my constituency resides. The vaccine roll-out has been slow to date, sadly, in Wales. Will the Secretary of State assure me that any MACA request for support for that vaccination roll-out will be met with open arms and that the Ministry of Defence stands ready to support the Welsh vaccination effort?

Mr Wallace: I absolutely will support any request from the Welsh Government to increase vaccination delivery to people in Wales.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab) [V]: I have had very positive feedback from Calderdale Council on the support from military planners, which has been incredibly welcome. However, the biggest challenge for planning ahead has been the intermittent supply of vaccines. Will the Secretary of State assure us that he is working closely with public health colleagues to align supply of the vaccine with the deployment of military resources, in order to get as many doses out as quickly as possible?

Mr Wallace: Yes; vaccine delivery or actually jabbing into people has increased on a daily basis and is consistently increasing towards meeting the Prime Minister's target of the middle of February. The hon. Lady will know that in Yorkshire and Humberside we have four planners in South Yorkshire, four in Humber, five in West Yorkshire, 86 personnel supporting community testing in Kirklees, and one environmental health officer supporting the South Yorkshire region as a whole.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con) [V]: Telford is home to MOD Donnington, a state-of-the-art Army logistics site, so I know at first hand that our armed forces excel at logistics. Will my right hon. Friend do all he can to ensure that this exceptional logistics expertise works with the NHS to scale up our vaccine network and deliver the vaccine programme 24/7 as soon as vaccines supply allows?

Mr Wallace: I visited Donnington at the beginning of this outbreak, where I saw at first hand the Army using their expertise to unload ventilators that had been brought into the country from China or other locations. As I said earlier, it reminds me of how important civil servants and the other workforces are in the armed forces; it is not just the uniformed personnel who are making things happen. MOD Donnington is not currently required as a base for vaccination by Public Health England or the Department of Health and Social Care, but we are always open to suggestions, and of course the logistics requirements of covid will still route through Donnington. On the personnel side, we have all seen Brigadier Prosser at the press conference giving his expertise and knowledge in helping the response.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Once again this is an opportunity to allow us to thank the Army for the great work it does. I welcome the statement by the Secretary of State about the amount of civilian requests that the Army responds to, and it is certainly a very impressive record.

Yesterday, the Minister for employment in Northern Ireland asked for the Army to assist with the covid response in Northern Ireland, and a former member of the Northern Ireland Committee for Health, Jonathan Buckley, has called for the Army's logistical know-how to be deployed also. Will the Secretary of State assure the House that he will not spare Sinn Féin blushes in any way in the Northern Ireland Executive, and if the Army is required and called on, it will be deployed and used appropriately in Northern Ireland?

Mr Wallace: I can give the hon. Gentleman that assurance. There are plenty of people on all sides of the community who recognise what this is about: a pandemic, and fighting that pandemic.

Even during the troubles, when I was there, there were many people in nationalist west Belfast, for example, who recognised the difference between security and other operations, and just getting on and helping people. I fully expect the Northern Ireland Executive to come forward with a request. We have some inbound. We will support them, whoever they come from—from whatever Minister they come from and whatever Ministry. If they require it and they need our help, they can have it.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con) [V]: Just as an example of some of the military activity in England, we have seen the military rapid reaction vaccination teams working. In Wales, military personnel are supporting health trusts and driving ambulances. In Scotland, they are supporting testing and vaccination. In Northern Ireland, I understand the defence estate has been loaned to the Police Service of Northern Ireland and that they are facilitating medevac.

Would the Secretary of State agree with me that this, more than ever, shows the security, strength and benefit of our four nations being part of the United Kingdom, rather than a separatist agenda which would weaken the whole country, and could have fragmented this valuable and essential response?

Mr Wallace: My right hon. Friend makes a really important point. When I send helicopters to the highlands and islands of Scotland with the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine—a British developed vaccine, using all the skills of both the international community and the United Kingdom community—I am incredibly conscious that this is a whole-of-nation effort to attack the virus and rid these shores of it.

We cannot help but note that the British forces are truly that: British. People in my office and my Department—indeed, people in all regiments—come from all four corners. When this is over and we are judged, one of the questions will be, “Did we reach the fingertips of the United Kingdom?” The armed forces make that happen.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab) [V]: I pay tribute to our armed forces, who are working hard to keep us safe during the pandemic. Barnsley East has not been allocated a vaccine centre, so can I ask the Secretary of State if it is possible for the armed forces to support a vaccine roll-out in my area?

Mr Wallace: The armed forces are there to help it happen in an area. If the regional NHS requests it or demands it, then of course we will be there to help to set it up, man it or staff it. In addition, no doubt some of the hon. Lady’s GP surgeries will be delivering the vaccine.

Not far away in other parts of West Yorkshire, we have 86 personnel in community testing. We have planners, as I listed earlier, in South Yorkshire, Humber and West Yorkshire. They are there and they are in listening

mode. They are also delivering other assistance. If they require more assistance, either from the local authority or the regional NHS, we will be there to deliver it.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I am afraid that this will have to be the last question; I have allowed the statement to run at least 10 minutes over the allocated time. However, I draw the attention of colleagues in the Chamber to the fact that there is a debate shortly on covid; they may perhaps wish to intervene on the Minister in the next debate. The final question comes from Sara Britcliffe.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con) [V]: Our armed forces really are the very best in the world. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the Army is working closely with local councils, such as our own in Lancashire, to set up our vaccine network and use battle preparation techniques to help us to keep up the pace?

Mr Wallace: Yes, I can. I visited the north-west region hub at Preston on Thursday and spoke with a number of leaders of the councils, including my hon. Friend’s. We are helping right now. What is really important here is that Whitehall recognises that local authorities are very, very important in finding those people who need a vaccine or need testing.

One of the lessons of Liverpool was that even when we set up a testing site literally outside the front door of certain people, the key people who we need to be tested or vaccinated do not always come forward. The local authorities will be a key plank in making sure we close the final mile on vaccines. That is why we will continue to work with them, both as the Ministry of Defence and the Department of Health and Social Care.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Secretary of State for the statement.

Point of Order

3.4 pm

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I rise to seek your advice on an issue in my constituency for which I am unable to get redress. The fact is that there is a social enterprise called Clarity that employs, essentially, people with disabilities. They work hard and have done for many years. Sadly, about a year ago, Clarity was taken over by a Mr Marks, and since then staff have failed to receive national insurance contributions, with many failing to receive their wages or support while undertaking childcare.

The total amount that these decent but very vulnerable people have failed to receive is now around £200,000. They cannot claim benefits because they are essentially employed. I pushed my right hon. Friends in the Treasury on whether they can give those staff interim payments, but I received no answer. I tried to get a debate in the House before Christmas, but clearly it is a lottery and I have failed. These are the most vulnerable people, but also the most decent, hard-working and brilliant people. I seek your advice on how I can possibly get my Government to address this significant problem.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the right hon. Member for that point of order and for giving me notice of it. He has clearly succeeded in bringing this issue to the attention of the House by raising his point of order. I know that the Treasury Bench will have heard what he has to say and will feed that back.

I assume that, in the first instance, the right hon. Member might like to raise this during the business statement and ask for a debate. I also know that the Leader of the House has made it clear that if right hon. and hon. Members are not satisfied with the speed at which they get responses from Government Departments, they should bring that to his attention and ask him to ensure that a response is forthcoming.

There are obviously other ways; I am sure that the Public Bill Office and the Table Office would be happy to give the right hon. Member advice on how he might like to raise the issue through other mechanisms. I hope that that is helpful. He has clearly raised the plight of his constituents successfully this afternoon at least.

To allow the safe exit of right hon. and hon. Members from this debate and to prepare for the next, we will have a three-minute suspension.

3.7 pm

Sitting suspended.

Abolition of Business Rates

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

3.10 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to abolish business rates; and for connected purposes.

At one of my first hustings as a prospective parliamentary candidate back in 2015, a question came from the audience about a local electrical retailer that had just closed down. The question, which came to loud applause from the audience, was, “What are the Government going to do about it?” The irony, of course, was that the business had closed not due to the actions or inactions of the Government, but because the people in that very audience had stopped shopping on high streets and started shopping online, which is creating the change we are seeing on our high streets this very day.

Having said that, there is no doubt that rent and rates are having a disproportionately large effect on high street businesses compared with online businesses. In time, of course, that differential will naturally diminish, as rents—and therefore rates—decrease. The problem is that by that time, hundreds of thousands of businesses and millions of jobs will have been lost forever. Last year alone, 180,000 jobs were lost in retail in the UK. We need immediate change.

My Bill delivers immediate change. It abolishes business rates completely and replaces the revenue with a small increase in VAT, thereby fundamentally levelling the playing field between online and our precious local high street businesses. I have taken into account the Government’s manifesto commitment not to increase VAT in this Parliament, but the scale and pace of change to the business landscape necessitates a new approach today.

Business rates as they were designed for a bygone era, when business went hand in hand with high street premises. Covid has quickly made that time seem even more distant, as the trends already in train have been accelerated due to our forced house arrest. Online sales now account for 33% of all retail sales, up from 20% only a year ago.

The inevitability of this transition and transformation, and the urgent need for reform, is widely recognised across the House. I have sat on two Select Committee inquiries on the matter, one by the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee and one a joint endeavour between the HCLG Committee and the Treasury Committee. The Treasury itself, of course, is fully aware of the need for reform, and our Ministers have gone further than any of their predecessors.

In July last year, the Treasury undertook a review and a call for evidence, which set out some potential options for reform. The main suggestions were an online sales tax, or increased rates of VAT or corporation tax. It seems that the Treasury is most keen on an online sales tax, as the document asked for opinions on that solution rather than the other two, and stated that the Treasury expects

“that any such tax would exist alongside business rates.”

That has to be seen as a further complication of the tax system.

I very much welcome the call for evidence, and my Bill and this speech are little more than a contribution to this debate, but I would like to offer one key reflection that is not addressed by the review. It is not only the retail playing field that needs to be levelled. Retail is perhaps the most obvious sector where consumer behaviour is changing, but there are similar trends in other fields. New competition to high street pubs and restaurants is emerging from the dark kitchens of business parks, facilitated by Deliveroo, Just Eat and Uber. Sales and lettings agents—I draw the House’s attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests—are being challenged by the likes of Purplebricks, Strike and Yopa, and travel agents and insurance brokers are also witnessing similar competitive trends.

An online sales tax for retail would therefore only partially level the business playing field. It would also be a very blunt instrument, as different retail sectors have different profit margins, so it would hit some sectors harder than others. Many high street retailers also offer online and click and collect sales, leading to the potentially fiendishly complex prospect of a retailer having to decide how a product was sold and quantifying the tax on it accordingly, while still having to pay business rates, albeit at a reduced level.

In my view, it would be better to completely scrap business rates and apply a small increase to the sales tax that we already have—VAT. That would immediately level the playing field and would not create any additional bureaucracy or burden on business. We would completely dispense with the convoluted business rate system, including revaluations, check, challenge, appeal, annual bills and debt collection. It would liberate thousands of talented, intelligent, hard-working people in the Valuation Office Agency and survey practices across the country to find new career opportunities that would help drive the UK economy forward.

No longer would we need the myriad reliefs—small business, charitable, empty property, retail and rural—as, due to its input and output elements, VAT would continue to automatically adjust, depending on the business type and turnover. A further and perhaps more controversial levelling would be delivered through a reduction of the

VAT threshold, currently £85,000, to the German level of £20,000. The current level creates winners and losers either side of the cliff edge. It disincentivises growth and incentivises tax evasion.

There are no easy solutions. As Ronald Reagan once said:

“There are no easy answers, but there are simple answers.”

An increase in VAT from 20p to 23p would fill the £30 billion per annum gap created by the abolition of business rates. Some might say, “Won’t businesses simply pass on the increase to consumers?” Yes, of course. In a competitive free market, all taxes are paid by consumers, as profit margins are inexorably driven down towards the cost of capital. Exactly the same thing happens with corporation tax, business rates and, indeed, online sales tax.

Others might raise concerns about how it might affect recent moves to allocate business rates receipts to fund local authorities, but the HCLG Committee heard compelling evidence that there was very little correlation between business rates and local service need, so it makes no sense to fund councils by means of a system that needs to be adjusted through convoluted top-ups and tariffs. We should look again at the future funding of our councils alongside this proposal.

Governments of all shades have a chequered history when it comes to simplification of the tax system, picking winners, targeting incentives and allocating reliefs. We should avoid doing that wherever possible. Instead, we should focus on a levelling of the business playing field. The move from business rates to VAT does exactly that. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Kevin Hollinrake, Andrew Griffith, Julian Knight, Richard Fuller, Tim Farron, Mark Garnier, Huw Merriman, Sir Greg Knight, Marco Longhi, Robbie Moore, Duncan Baker and Aaron Bell present the Bill.

Kevin Hollinrake accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 15 January, and to be printed (Bill 237).

Covid-19

3.19 pm

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar): I beg to move,

That this House has considered covid-19.

Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for your courtesy in slightly drawing out your introduction to allow me to take my mask off as I came to the Dispatch Box.

It is less than a year since the coronavirus was first mentioned in a debate in this House, on 22 January 2020. The House has debated this issue, which has affected all aspects of our national life, on many occasions since then. I would say at the outset that, throughout, it is important that we remember that all Members of this House share a common goal. They may have differences of opinion and there may be different perspectives on how best to achieve that goal, but it is important that every Member of this House is clear in their determination to see this virus beaten and to see our country recover economically and in every other sense. I pay tribute to all right hon. and hon. Members and to the strength and sincerity of their views on this important topic. Since that first debate, novel SARS-CoV-2, which of course we all now know too well as covid-19, has caused untold disruption to all our lives and our way of life in this country. It is right, at this point, that we remember all those who, sadly, have lost their lives to the disease.

In this first general debate on covid-19 of 2021, it is worth reflecting that despite our painful familiarity with the challenges we face, the situation today is markedly different from many occasions in the past. For a start, and perhaps most importantly, we now see the way out. We have not one but two safe and effective vaccines being injected into people's arms up and down the country as we speak.

Sir Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): Sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker, just let me take my mask off.

I thank my hon. Friend for his introductory remarks. The vaccine is being rolled out across the country, and in Broxbourne, but a number of my constituents are waiting to be informed by post, as I understand will be the case across the country. There are difficulties with the post at the moment, through nobody's fault but the virus's, so could he keep an eye on the postal service to ensure that, if post is not the best way, another way can be found to let people know that their number is coming up in the draw for the vaccine?

Edward Argar: It is always a pleasure to hear from my hon. Friend, who is also my friend, in this House, and he raises an extremely important point. I can give him the reassurance that I, other Ministers and particularly the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), who is leading the vaccine deployment effort, will continue to look at ensuring that every means appropriate is utilised to ensure that people in my hon. Friend's constituency and across the country get notified when their turn is up, so that they have every opportunity to get that life-saving injection.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab)
rose—

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con) *rose—*

Edward Argar: I will give way briefly to the hon. Lady, and then to my hon. and gallant Friend.

Catherine West: Does the Minister agree with the suggestion that, given that youth unemployment is shooting up, this might be the time for Royal Mail to take on some extra staff to cover those who are off sick? It is crucial that people know when their appointments are so that they do not miss that golden opportunity to get the job.

Edward Argar: I had the pleasure of working with the hon. Lady in a past life before either of us were Members of this House, and she makes a typically sensible suggestion, which I am sure Royal Mail will have heard. I hope that it will reflect carefully on what she has said.

Bob Stewart: The real problem is that people will not know whether they have been called, because the post has not arrived. In my constituency, several instances have come to my notice of people not getting post for over a week. If they are called forward in that week, they are stymied, aren't they?

Edward Argar: I reassure my hon. and gallant Friend that, while there may on occasions be challenges with the post, we are persistent in our determination, and the NHS is persistent in its determination, to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to get this job. Where someone does not respond, or does not turn up for an appointment, we will keep trying, because it is really important that everyone has the opportunity to have that injection, which could save their life.

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con)
rose—

Edward Argar: I will give way to my hon. Friend, but then I will make some progress.

Andrew Griffith: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way; I know he will want to make progress. One group is further away from receiving a vaccine: undergraduates who would otherwise be returning to college today. A significant proportion of their education has been disrupted already. Is there any hope that the Minister can offer to the nation's undergraduates?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I seem to be taking multiple interventions today from people I have known in a past life in different ways and forms, which is always a pleasure. He will be aware that the prioritisation and roll-out of vaccines in that context are guided by the clinical advice of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation, which, as he will appreciate, at the current time, and rightly, is clearly focused on what will do the most to save lives. We have seen—I will turn to this in my speech shortly—that age is the single biggest determinant of risk of death, so it is right that we are prioritising those most at risk as we roll out the vaccine. When I come to them later, he will hear about the very ambitious and deliverable plans, which he heard about from the vaccines Minister yesterday, to ramp up the roll-out across our country.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con) *rose—*

Edward Argar: I did promise my hon. Friend that I would take an intervention from him—then I will make progress.

James Sunderland: In 1940, when our small boats set sail for Dunkirk, nobody stopped to check through health and safety paperwork or institutional red tape. Will my hon. Friend the Minister please confirm that the Government will cut through unnecessary bureaucracy as we embark on the vaccine roll-out, and that we will throw the kitchen sink at this with the help of our armed forces?

Edward Argar: I am incredibly grateful to my hon. and—gallant—if I recollect correctly—Friend, who has served in the past with distinction. He is absolutely right to highlight the amazing work of our armed forces, which was highlighted in the Chamber earlier this afternoon. He is also right to highlight the spirit of getting things done. He will have seen that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has been very clear that, while making no compromises on safety for patients and for those receiving the vaccine, he is working very hard to make sure that any bureaucratic barriers that do not support patient safety are removed to ensure the speedy and effective roll-out of the vaccine. So I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his point.

We have vaccinated more people than the rest of Europe put together—well over 2 million individuals, including more than a quarter of the over-80s in this country. I think that is a record to be proud of, but there is no room for complacency. We continue to work hard to get more injections in more people's arms.

In that context, I pay tribute not just to the Secretary of State and to the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon, but to Kate Bingham and the vaccine taskforce, who have done so much to make sure that this country was at the forefront of being able to purchase and deploy vaccines to help save lives. Yet, just as we accelerate the deployment of the vaccine further and faster, we must also recognise that the new variant of the coronavirus does present us with a renewed challenge.

Our strategy has always been, and continues to be, to suppress the virus to protect the NHS and save lives until a vaccine can make us safe, but with a new variant that is more than twice as transmissible, we must be clear that that task becomes considerably harder. The figures from the Office for National Statistics are stark: more than one in 50 of the UK population has the virus and an even higher proportion than that in places such as London. So, just as the virus has evolved, so must our response. We find ourselves once again in a difficult and challenging national lockdown, taking steps that I do not think anyone could have imagined in January last year—steps that, understandably, are truly testing the patience and forbearance of every person in this country but that are essential to relieve the pressure on our NHS, allow for the vaccine to be effectively deployed and, ultimately, set us free from the need for these restrictions.

Before I turn to those steps in a little more detail and the deployment of our vaccines, I am sure the whole House will, as always, join me in paying tribute to the heroic responses we continue to see from people in every walk of life. The return of the clap for carers initiative last Thursday, under the new guise of clap for

heroes, is a reflection of the shift in our collective understanding of just what heroism and service look like and a tribute to everyone who is helping us push through this difficult time.

I know that my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall), will join me in paying tribute to and thanking everyone who works in our NHS in this country and all those who support not just the NHS but social care, in care homes, social care settings and domiciliary care—people in a range of roles up and down our country who, day in, day out, selflessly care for those who need it. In a past life, I was a local councillor, and I had the privilege of being the cabinet member for adult social care, health and public health for the council on which I served. I saw at first hand the amazing work that our social care workforce do, and it is right that we recognise that at every opportunity in this Chamber.

It is also important to highlight the great British scientists who are at the forefront of humanity's fight against this virus, developing not only the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine but life-saving treatments for those who become infected with covid, first in the form of dexamethasone and now tocilizumab and sarilumab—I have considerable sympathy with the Prime Minister in his attempts to pronounce those—both of which have been found to reduce the risk of death for critically ill patients by almost a quarter and cut time spent in intensive care by as much as 10 days. Those life-saving drugs are now available through the NHS, and it is an example of the huge debt of gratitude we owe people from all walks of life—not just those on the health and social care frontline, but people who are working under very different but no less considerable pressures for our country. The Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), who is the Minister for prevention, public health and primary care, will no doubt reflect on that when she winds up the debate.

In terms of the context, I must first turn to the pressures in our acute hospital settings. Across the UK, there are more than 32,000 patients in our hospitals with covid. That is over a third of the NHS's available beds of all types. On 31 December last year, the total reported admission to hospital and diagnosis of covid in English hospitals was 2,536—on one day. That increased by 46% in the week that followed, so on 9 January, we were seeing 3,718 people admitted. The pressures on our acute hospitals and those who work in them are intense. Patients are therefore currently being treated in Nightingale hospitals in Manchester, Exeter, Bristol and Harrogate to cope with these numbers, and NHS England has confirmed that the Nightingale in London is also open for patients.

Last Monday, all four UK chief medical officers recommended that we move the country to covid-19 alert level 5, meaning that in their expert view, there is a material risk of healthcare services being overwhelmed. In this place, we have often talked about the most frightening of possibilities, but frankly, we have never been this close to seeing it happen, although we are all doing everything we can to ensure that the NHS continues to be able to cope during this time. Quite rightly, we have thanked our NHS staff, and people in this country have expressed gratitude and clapped them, but I think it is fair to say—echoing some of the intensive care

[Edward Argar]

doctors and nurses I have seen in the media recently—that the best way we can all say thank you to our NHS is to follow the rules and stay home in line with those rules, to ease the pressure on them.

That is why the choice that this House took last Wednesday to vote overwhelmingly for new regulations, placing England into a national lockdown alongside the action taken in each of the devolved nations, was the right choice. The key message is and must be as it was in the spring, as I have just enunciated: you must stay home. We have always said, and I have always been clear, that it is right that schools should be the last thing to close, and we deeply regret that we have had to close them, but as we begin to move out of lockdown, when we can safely do so—and, as the Prime Minister has promised, through the gradual loosening of restrictions when we can—schools will be the first thing to reopen.

Our regulations provide for these new restrictions until 31 March 2021. I hope that they may not be needed for as long as that, but that time allows us to take steady, controlled and evidence-led decisions, including moving places down through tiers on a local basis—again, when it is safe to do so. As you would expect, Mr Deputy Speaker, we will of course keep these restrictions under continuous review, with a statutory requirement to look at them every two weeks and a legal obligation to remove them if they are deemed no longer necessary to limit transmission of the virus.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): On that point, to me, the right strategy to stop the NHS being overwhelmed seems to be to have a flexible tier system, whereby we work out whether local hospitals in each region are about to be overwhelmed; and, if they are, we go into lockdown. Does my hon. Friend understand what I am saying? Is there going to be this flexible approach, rather than this mass lockdown nationally?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his intervention. With the new variant identified before Christmas, we are seeing hospital admission rates and demand for hospital services rising across our country. That is why it was absolutely right that we instituted the measures that we did, which have seen what it is effectively called a national lockdown at this time. The Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Health have been clear that they hope, and would expect, that as we get the infection under control and ease the pressure on the NHS, when it is safe to do so we will be able to look to returning to that tiering system. Exactly as my right hon. Friend says, one of the five key factors in whether an area went up or down among the tiers was local hospital capacity—and I emphasise the “local” in that context—but, sadly, we are not in that place as we stand here and debate this matter today.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): My hon. Friend is being very generous with his time. Could he perhaps say more about what percentage of those vaccinated in the vulnerable categories will count towards such a consideration?

Edward Argar: If my hon. Friend will show a little forbearance as I make a little progress, I will come to vaccinations and the vulnerable in a moment. I will seek to address his point then; if I do not, I am sure that he will prompt me.

I think every Member of this House fully appreciates and understands the huge burden that these restrictions now place on people today and every day: on pupils, on parents, on businesses, on individuals and on families. The Secretary of State for Education has set out our plan to support people in education settings, including with the provision of new equipment for remote learning. For businesses such as those in retail, hospitality and leisure that have been forced to close their doors once again, we are providing an additional £4.6 billion of support. There will be not a single Member in this House who has not received correspondence and pleas from their constituents who run businesses, be it in hospitality or the self-employed—a whole range of people. Members on both sides of the House will be working flat out to seek to assist them. I do appreciate the pressures that they are under. Of course, that support comes on top of our unprecedented £280 billion plan for jobs, including the extension of the furlough scheme until April.

Let me turn to vaccines. We know that in the long run the best way to help everyone in this country is to suppress the virus and to vaccinate people against it. The NHS is committed to offering, by 15 February, a vaccination to everyone in the top four priority groups, who currently account for more than four out of every five—roughly 88%—covid fatalities. The groups include older care home residents and staff, everyone over 70, all frontline NHS and care staff, and all those who are clinically extremely vulnerable. In working towards that target, there are already more than 1,000 vaccination centres throughout the country, including more than 200 hospital sites, which will increase to 270, and some 775 GP-led sites. Of course, pharmacies are already working with GPs to deliver the vaccine in many areas of the country. As vaccine supply increases, community pharmacies will continue to play an essential role.

Before my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) prompts me, let me turn briefly to the question he asked. The Prime Minister and ministerial colleagues will take into consideration a number of factors when looking at the right time—the safe time, based on the scientific and clinical advice—to ease the current restrictions and to move to a tiered system. One factor that I know will weigh with them and play a part in that decision will be the extent to which vaccination has significantly reduced the risk of death in those groups most likely to be affected by the virus. It would, though, be premature—indeed, it would go well beyond my pay grade—for me to set out the detail of what precise considerations the Prime Minister will be looking at as we reach that point, hopefully in a few months’ time.

This week has seen the announcement of the opening of seven mass vaccination hubs in places such as sports stadiums and exhibition centres, and yesterday we launched our full vaccine deployment plan, which includes measures that we will take, together with local authorities, to maximise take-up among harder-to-reach communities, and our new national booking service, which will make it easier to book and access appointments. In that context, I should pay tribute to one of the great strengths of this country, which is the willingness of the people of this country to step up, pull together and volunteer to assist in times of great need for this country. We are seeing that happening now. In that context, I also pay tribute to *The Sun*’s “Jabs Army” campaign, through

which *The Sun* is doing its bit to encourage people to sign up and to volunteer—I believe it has got more than 30,000 people to sign up. All this is a reflection of the innate strength of community in this country: when something needs to be done, the people of this country step up and do their bit.

Another part of the plan is our new vaccinations dashboard, which gives daily updates on our progress in the biggest vaccination effort in British history.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): The Minister has not touched on the covid deniers out there. No doubt we are all getting emails from them, and they are obviously on social media as well. It is important that we get across the message about the safety of the vaccine and the importance of everybody getting a vaccine. It is not just about someone's personal freedom and what they do; it is about what they can give to somebody else as well.

Edward Argar: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I say to those who may doubt or speculate about this disease: it is real and it has, sadly, taken more than 80,000 of our fellow citizens from us. Watch the news coverage that we all see every night of our amazing frontline NHS staff explaining just what they have seen, what they have had to do on their shift, how they have fought valiantly to save people's lives, often successfully but on occasions sadly not, and what that has meant for them. I reflect on an incredibly dignified elderly gentlemen whom I saw on the news before Christmas—I think his name was Mr Lewis from the Rhondda—who, in the space of a week, had lost his wife and two other members of his family to this cruel disease. I say to those who say that it is not serious and that it is not as dangerous as some people say: watch those news clips and listen to those people who have been bereaved, and to all those people who have been in hospital and thankfully have recovered but have been through hell and back with this disease. The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. We all have a part to play in following the rules and beating this disease. I, for one, as soon as I am eligible to have my vaccination—I fear that the grey hair may not get me higher up the list and that I am too young, along with my shadow, and we may have a while to wait—will certainly take up that offer.

Sir Charles Walker: The Minister is being so generous in giving way. Long covid will take another form: there will be mental health consequences. May I make one suggestion? We have the two eminent professors flanking the Prime Minister, Professors Whitty and Vallance. At some stage, could we have someone of equal eminence from the mental health field to talk about how we are going to do the mental health piece of the recovery?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend makes a hugely important point. He, of course, has been a huge champion in this House for the cause of mental health. I know that, as we speak, the Minister for Patient Safety, Suicide Prevention and Mental Health, my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries), is involved in discussions and meetings about exactly that. There is already support in place, but she is very clear that we need to recognise, in the context of long covid and the impact of this disease, including its indirect impacts, that the future mental health of our nation is hugely important, so my hon. Friend is right to highlight it.

At this Dispatch Box, we have often had occasion to exchange grim statistics: cases, hospitalisations and, sadly, deaths. Of course, behind every one of those numbers is a person—a person with hopes, fears, dreams, families and friends—but I know that the whole House will join me in looking forward to exchanges about perhaps more positive statistics in the weeks to come, of more vaccines given, more people safe and more lives saved.

Before too long I hope we will find ourselves in a situation where we can look at the curve of a graph going up and up not with fear and trepidation about what it means but with tremendous hope, as we look at a graph of vaccines delivered. That prospect is within our grasp, and although we are not yet out of the woods and must not blow it now but must stick to the rules for a little longer until we can be safe, I believe that that prospect should cheer us through the difficult weeks ahead.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I pay tribute to the volunteers in Clitheroe whom I saw on Friday helping GPs to roll out the vaccine there.

Some housekeeping notes. To those MPs who are contributing virtually: we will be able to see the clock on the screens in the Chamber, at the bottom of the right-hand side; you should be able to see the clock as well, and please try to finish before three minutes is up. It is a lot cleaner if you do that. To those contributing in the Chamber, the timer will be on the usual monitors in the Chamber, and there is a three-minute limit on all Back-Bench contributions.

3.47 pm

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): I know that the Minister and hon. Members on both sides of the House understand the seriousness of the situation that we now face. Yesterday, the chief medical officer warned that the next few weeks will be the worst of the pandemic, and the chief executive of NHS England said that the virus is spreading out of control in many parts of the country. As the Minister said, there are more than 32,000 covid patients now in hospital, up from 18,000 at the peak of the first wave. In my own hospitals in Leicester a quarter of patients have covid-19. Elsewhere this is 40% or even 50%, and we are preparing for those levels to hit us too.

On top of that, 46,000 hospital staff are currently off work sick with the virus, and the consequences of that are stark. Staff-to-patient ratios in acute and intensive care are stretched to the limit of acceptable levels, if not beyond. All but the most urgent operations are being cancelled in many parts of the country, including for cancer care. Ambulances are queuing for hours outside hospitals to get seriously ill patients into beds and some hospitals are even running dangerously low on oxygen supply.

Dealing with this awful virus, especially the new, more virulent strain, was always going to be extremely difficult, but I do not believe that the severity of the situation we are now in was inevitable. Over the past nine months, the Government have continually changed their message to the public, and have repeatedly been too slow to act, even though we know that the virus ruthlessly exploits ambiguity and delay. At the heart of the problem is the failure of the Prime Minister and some members of the Conservative party to understand

[Liz Kendall]

that protecting people's health and the economy is not a zero-sum game, because we cannot get the economy going again if we do not stay on top of the virus.

The individual freedoms that we all hold dear—our ability to learn, work, do business, travel the world and see those we love most—depend on the actions of others. No man or woman is an island. That has always been the case, but covid-19 has thrown our interdependency into sharper relief than ever before. Until the Prime Minister grasps that fact he will continue to make the same mistakes, and many in our country will pay a bitter price.

While most attention focuses understandably on the extreme pressures facing the NHS, the case I want to make is that we cannot protect the NHS if we fail to protect social care. Alongside the need for swift and decisive action, that is one of the most important lessons that should have been learned from the first wave, but once again there are warning signs of pressures building in social care which, I fear, have been downplayed or even ignored. The number of covid outbreaks in care homes has tripled in the past month. Care homes are reporting staff shortages of up to 40%. The latest weekly death rates in care homes are out today: 824 deaths for the week ending 8 January. Those numbers have doubled since November, and are the highest since May.

Ministers must heed those warnings and they must act, not just because after 20,000 deaths from covid-19 so far in care homes we must do everything possible to protect residents, or because care workers and unpaid family carers are physically and emotionally shattered after 11 months at the frontline and deserve more help and support, but because if we cannot keep people safe in their own homes or in care homes, or move them back home from hospital when medically they are able to leave, the whole system will buckle under the strain.

After all the problems earlier this year, with covid-19 patients being discharged to care homes that could not cope, the Government should finally have gripped the issue and delivered a proper plan. Yesterday, we learned that only 118 care homes have been designated as safe to accept covid patients from hospital, although the Government promised in November that there would be at least 500. Understandably, many care homes do not want to take covid patients from hospital, especially as insurers will not cover the associated risks. While the Government have provided indemnity against such claims to the NHS, they have still not done so for social care, despite repeatedly being asked to do so.

This is just one example of the way in which social care is still not being prioritised, treated or funded equally with the NHS. Frontline care workers are still chronically undervalued and underpaid. Almost three quarters do not even earn the real living wage, despite doing some of the most important work in society, looking after the people we love most. Millions more unpaid family carers are being stretched to breaking point, trying to look after the people they love. Even before the pandemic almost half of unpaid carers had not had a single break for five whole years, and since the virus millions more families have taken on an even bigger role, but with precious little help and support in return. So I urge the Government to consider what immediate extra support can be provided for social

care—for care workers and family carers—over the coming months, when the pressures will be the greatest we have ever seen.

I know that across the country, as the Minister said, the vaccine provides real hope for care workers, care users and families that the nightmare they face can and will end, but we are in a race against time. The Government must leave no stone unturned in their plans to deliver the vaccine to all elderly care home residents and staff by the end of this month, and we will support them in their efforts to do so. However, we really do need to see daily vaccination rates for this group published so we know whether the Government are on course to complete this commitment in just under three weeks' time.

People need to know when they can start visiting their relatives in care homes once the vaccine has been delivered, because this is currently totally unclear and causing real upset and concern for families across the country—people who have not seen their relatives for months and months on end. Ministers should also set out a more detailed timetable for vaccinating hundreds of thousands of other care workers by mid-February. This needs to include those working with disabled adults as well as older people, those working in home care as well as care homes, workers in supported living and personal assistants employed by direct payments. I think we are going to have to go way beyond the Government's current plans if we are going to vaccinate family carers aged under 65 as part of priority group 6, as the JCVI now recommends.

The vaccine is the light at the end of a very dark tunnel, and as we begin to emerge, we must resolve to build a better Britain, not go back to business as usual. Nowhere is this more true than for social care. In July 2019, the Prime Minister promised on the steps of Downing Street that he had a plan to fix the crisis in social care. A year later, he again claimed his Government "won't wait" to fix the problem, yet six months on his plan is still nowhere to be seen, and instead delayed until sometime later this year. In October, the Health Minister in the House of Lords said:

"There simply is not the...political capacity to take on a major generational reform...in the midst of this massive epidemic."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 28 October 2020; Vol. 807, c. 226.]

That is not good enough, and I would argue that this is precisely the time we need a long-term plan of far-reaching reform to give people hope that a better future is possible after the horrors of covid-19.

We need a social care system that works for older people and working-age adults with physical and learning disabilities, who make up a third of the users and a half of the budget of social care but are still too often ignored. We need a system that fundamentally shifts the focus of support towards prevention and early intervention to help people stay living independently and well in their own homes for as long as possible; a system where social care is fully joined up with but not run by the NHS, so people do not have to battle their way round all the different services, telling their story time and again; and a system that is properly funded after a decade of cuts, so care workers get the pay and training they deserve, families get decent support and there is help from the wider community too.

Yesterday, 88-year-old Moira Edwards, the first person to be vaccinated in one of the new NHS mass vaccine centres, spoke for many of us when she said that she

could not wait to give her family a hug. I know that that is exactly how I feel. This pandemic has proved once again just how important our families are, but it has also exposed the fundamental flaws in the system of social care on which millions of families depend. The reality of modern family life is that more of us will need care, and need to care, as we all live for longer. So if we want to provide dignity and security for older and disabled people, and if we want to help families balance their work and caring responsibilities, and offer more than 1.5 million low-paid care workers hope for a better future, transforming social care must be a national mission. Labour Members stand ready to play our part in one of the biggest challenges facing our country, but it depends on Government action, which they must take—and now.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Just to remind everybody in the Chamber that we now have a new one-way system, so Members enter via the door in front of me, and exit via the side doors or behind me—do not enter behind the Speaker's Chair. I call Sir Peter Bottomley. There is a three-minute limit.

4 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con) [V]: I thank the hon. Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) for her response to the Minister's introduction to this important debate. I take as the theme words from the annex to the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation advice, which said that we had to

“maximise benefit and reduce harm”.

Before I make some suggestions that are intended to be helpful to the Government and to the JCVI, I wish to read out a few words that have arrived just now from one of my mature constituents:

“My husband and I were advised on Saturday evening...that the vaccination was available to us on Sunday”—

late afternoon—

“We attended the...Health Centre at that time.

We are writing to say how pleased we were to be offered the jab so quickly and by the way we were looked after at the centre...The staff were very efficient and helpful and made the whole event as stress free as possible.

All credit to all concerned especially those at the Barn Surgery.”

That has been typical for many of the 2 million or so who have already been vaccinated or had their first jab, and we hope it will be true for many, many more.

Let me discuss the problems. I was disappointed to hear that dental staff were not originally allowed to get the vaccination, as they were not directly employed by the NHS, even though they were NHS service providers. I hope that situation has been changed. I feel strongly about another small group, those with motor neurone disease, because of friends of mine who have had the condition. In Northern Ireland, people with that condition were immediately regarded as extremely vulnerable, although that was not necessarily so in England. Perhaps the Minister will say, either in this debate or at some other stage, whether or not that is so.

There are those whose absence from work makes a big difference to the service for the rest of us, and I would argue that reasonably healthy people in their 70s, such as me, can delay our vaccination so that younger people who are not critically vulnerable but whose work is critical to those who are vulnerable, such as the police

and education staff—teachers and their support staff—can be vaccinated early. That will mean that they do not have to stay off work when there is some sort of threat around. I hope that the JCVI will find some way of bringing vaccinations for them forward as fast as possible.

There are other issues that I can go back over when an inquiry is held, but now is not the time to go into them in detail. However, I commend the wise family doctors and wise hospital doctors who from January a year ago were telling me things that would have made a significant beneficial difference had the Government picked them up earlier—or the NHS had picked them up earlier, because this is not all about the Government.

I want to talk about the excluded—those who do not have regular jobs, those who were properly paid income as directors. They have been excluded for too long—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The time limit has gone. I am terribly sorry, Sir Peter, but we have to move on. The clock is not on the next speaker, the Front-Bench spokesperson for the Scottish National party, Dr Philippa Whitford.

4.3 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP) [V]: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. First, I wish to pay tribute to all NHS and social care staff across the UK for the incredible role they have played in this crisis and to all the key workers who have helped to maintain food or energy supplies, and kept our public services operating. I echo the Minister in saying that the best way for all of us to express our gratitude is to stick to the rules and stay at home.

With the novel coronavirus emerging just a year ago, all Governments have had to find their way. There are many aspects of the UK Government's covid response that can be criticised, especially being too slow to lock down in March, September and yet again in December, or outsourcing testing and contact tracing to companies with no previous experience, such as Deloitte and Serco, instead of using NHS and public health expertise. I am sure that many of the issues will be well-aired in this debate, so I will focus on where we are now and on what options should be considered for the next steps.

The first thing is to recognise that it is a false dichotomy to set public health against the economy, lives against livelihoods. People will simply not engage with the economy if they do not feel safe. The countries that have suffered the least economic harm are those with previous experience of SARS. Last February, they quickly acted on their learning from the epidemic of 2002. They initially closed their borders and have since maintained tight border control with testing and strict quarantine of all arrivals. They drove down early outbreaks and then worked to eliminate community spread. Those countries, such as Taiwan, New Zealand and Singapore, all now have domestic economies that are fully open and societies that are engaged in the pleasures of sporting events, dining out or simply having a few friends round, or, as the shadow Minister said, being able to give a loved one a hug.

So what is the strategy? First, let us avoid importing any more dangerous covid variants by tightly controlling the external borders of the UK, and, through co-operation with the devolved nations and the Republic of Ireland, try to make the whole common travel area covid-secure.

[Dr Philippa Whitford]

I welcome the plan to require pre-travel tests for those coming to the UK, but they should be PCR tests, not lateral flow devices that miss more than half of those carrying the virus. We could learn from Pacific countries that enforce strict quarantine for incoming travellers, either in hotels or through digital monitoring at home. Such a strict approach would avoid importing the South African strain or other more concerning mutations that we do not even know about yet. If it contributed to getting the domestic economy fully open, the Government would then be able to focus their financial support on the industries involved in international travel, such as aviation and aerospace.

To avoid creating more mutations within the UK, it is critical to drive down the current rate of infection. It is simply a numbers game. More spread means more viral replication and leads to more mutations. All of this increases the risk of developing an even more problematic variant. The big advance, of course, compared with last March is that vaccines are now available, and all four health services across the UK are working as fast as possible to deliver them to those at highest risk of covid. This is the light at the end of the tunnel, but, with just over 3% of the population vaccinated and hospitals in London at risk of being overwhelmed within weeks, it is simply not possible to vaccinate our way out of this current surge, so this lockdown is absolutely necessary.

The Minister mentioned those who undermine the rules by not taking covid seriously. A comparison of the first SARS epidemic and covid-19 highlights the fact that infectiousness is a greater danger than virulence. SARS had 10 times the mortality rate of covid, but only infected about 8,000 people and killed fewer than 800 worldwide. In contrast, despite appearing to be a much milder condition, covid-19 has infected more than 90 million people and already killed almost 2 million. As the new variant is estimated to be 70% more infectious than the original virus, uncontrollable spread is the real threat.

Therefore, rather than already discussing arbitrary end dates for this lockdown, it needs to be maintained long enough to fully suppress the current outbreak. We all know that lockdown is really difficult, but with approximately 55,000 new cases every day that will take time, and if it is relaxed too quickly, cases will simply rebound as they did in the autumn. Thereafter, the aim is that the test, trace and isolate system should detect and deal with sporadic cases and shut down minor outbreaks so that they do not get out of control. Instead of planning to spend eye-watering sums on lateral flow tests with poor sensitivity and a danger of giving people false reassurance, it would make more sense to fund an expansion of NHS labs to increase capacity and provide quicker turnaround times for PCR tests. It has been good to see an improvement in contact tracing with the greater involvement of local public health teams, as has been the case in the devolved nations since the start. However, the most important aspect of test, trace and isolate is the isolation of those carrying the virus. Only isolation stops the onward spread of the virus. No amount of testing or tracing will control the epidemic unless we get people isolating when required. The £500 isolation payment is welcome, but it is less than the minimum wage. It is important to clarify what happens to those whose applications are

refused, and also to assess the need for practical support, such as the delivery of shopping or medicines. It is well worth providing such support if it helps stop the onward spread of the virus.

The fourth part of the strategy should be to make indoor settings—such as hospitality, offices and schools—safer by improving ventilation and air purification systems. A Government taskforce could assess the various new technologies available. Removing VAT or providing grants would help hard-hit sectors such as hospitality to reduce the risk of being repeatedly shut down in the future.

Finally, it is important to get the communication strategy right. Public health messaging should be clear, simple and honest, instead of undermining trust by constantly over-promising. Whether it is claims of world-beating apps and systems, or just repeatedly saying that the crisis will be over by a certain date, it is not helpful to have a trail of broken promises. I know from more than 30 years of having to speak and break bad news to cancer patients that honesty is always the best policy. Treat the public like grown-ups and share information openly, whether good or bad.

There was no handbook on covid at the start of the pandemic a year ago, but there are lessons we should have learned by now from research and experience, from our own mistakes or the successes of others. The Government need to make this lockdown count and ensure a systematic approach to covid in 2021.

4.12 pm

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): When a friend of mine in Switzerland called this morning to say that the covid debate in the UK had become extremely polarised, it made me think about the need for rationality and proportionality in reporting. I was therefore appalled when I switched on the BBC and saw:

“Covid: 2020 saw most excess deaths since World War Two”.

In fact, further down the report it says that, when the age and size of the population are taken into account, 2020 saw the worst death rate since the mid-2000s. We do not need sensationalist reporting like that, particularly from national broadcasters, because there are real questions to be asked about mortality.

There is no clear way to measure covid mortality. We measure excess death rates, those who died within 28 days of a positive test and those who have covid on their death certificate, but that does not tell us what we really need to know: who actually died of covid as the primary infection, who died with covid—died of something else but was diagnosed as being positively exposed—and who died as a result of covid, either because of the lack of access to healthcare during the lockdown or because of the diminution of healthcare capacity because of high infection rates. That is why I reiterate my plea for a cross-party, cross-House commission to look at how we can actually get better data, which we will need for the future.

I turn to the success of the Government’s vaccination programme. The seven-day average of doses administered per million population show the UK at 2,500, Denmark second top in Europe at 1,500, well ahead of Germany on 571 and France on only 340. This is a great success for the Government. The success in the availability of the vaccine is the success of the strength of the Union. The UK Government took action to invest £120 million

between 2016 and 2021 on new vaccines. The United Kingdom Government, on behalf of the whole country, secured access to 367 million doses from seven vaccine developers, with four different vaccine types.

The people of Scotland are asking as a response to covid, “Will I get my vaccine soon?” and “Will I get my business support?” What about the Scottish Government? The Deputy First Minister says that a second referendum is a “critical response to covid”. What a damning indictment: nationalist fanaticism over independence taking greater importance than the needs of the Scottish people. We can deal with public health emergencies much better as a United Kingdom. It is not the Government of England who are cutting the number of vaccine targets in half for the rest of January. We can not only do better within the United Kingdom, but help to lead the global response to this and future pandemics better together.

4.15 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab) [V]: The Government’s complete failure to get the virus under control means that once again we are in a lockdown, but it is clear already that this lockdown is inadequate to drive the new strain of the virus right down to safe levels. Data shows that mobility during this lockdown is twice the levels of the March lockdown. The Government’s response to an inadequate lockdown has not been to address the real reasons so many are having to travel. Instead, it has been to launch a cynical PR campaign, blaming the public for a lack of compliance.

It is not the first time that the Government have sought to blame the public to cover up their own failings, which have led to tens of thousands of unnecessary deaths. The real reason there is so much movement compared to the March lockdown is that people are having to go to work. Workplaces that clearly are not essential in the true meaning of the word are still open. Workers who want to work from home are having to go to their workplaces. Others simply cannot afford to stay at home. We need a proper lockdown to get this virus under control. That means the Government must provide the financial support needed for businesses and people to get through this crisis.

The Chancellor’s vacuous statement in the House yesterday showed that the Government are callously ignoring the financial hardship that so many find themselves in. A proper lockdown means that all non-essential workplaces should be closed and those workers who cannot work from home should be given full furlough. It means urgent help for the millions of self-employed people who have never had any support, and for the many others facing ruin and so are still having to work. It means sick pay at real living wage levels. The vaccines offer real hope, but it will be many, many months until they are sufficiently rolled out.

This lockdown should also be the starting point for a zero covid strategy—a maximum suppression strategy that has seen life return to normal in New Zealand and in much of east Asia. But this failing lockdown is a sign that the Government are just going to continue with their failing strategy. Thousands more will die as a result over the coming months. The economic damage will continue and future lockdowns may be needed. It will be the Government, not the public, who will be to blame.

4.18 pm

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): We are back in lockdown again and 2021 is looking a lot like 2020. The difference, and the reason I supported it last week, is that we finally have the ultimate release from lockdown in the form of the vaccine.

I warmly welcome the vaccine delivery plan published yesterday. It seems that we are off to a good start, with 2.3 million people having been vaccinated. That is great. There is no doubt that we will see problems. Supply, to quote the vaccines Minister, is going to be “lumpy”. That is creating difficulties. We have begun well in my constituency, but it is hugely frustrating to see the postponing today of a raft of appointments for this week because of problems of supply. We cannot duck the fact that that has hurt public confidence, and I ask the Minister responding today to set out for the House exactly, because I keep being asked this, where the supply falls down at an early stage. Is it the manufacturing? Is it the settling process? What exactly is it? I am told that the deliveries for next week look much better. We have a lot of AstraZeneca vaccine coming into the county, so I hope the Minister can help us to correct this problem, to get those appointments made and carried out as soon as possible.

It remains my belief that these horrible restrictions on our lives cannot be in place a day longer than required—and, to be clear, they are currently required. Alongside the published vaccine delivery plan and daily figures on how we are getting covid done, we must give the public some hope. As the Secretary of State said last night at the press conference, over 88% of those likely to get seriously unwell, and sadly die, reside within the top four priority vaccine groups. Given that the only metric that really counts, and the reason public support for the lockdown is so high, is the desire to prevent the NHS from being overwhelmed, logic would dictate that once that threat has gone away, we can start to lift restrictions.

We need clear heads if we are going to do this. Covid is not a conspiracy and it is not a hoax. We were right to take it seriously last spring, and since, but we are equally right to demand a plan that dismantles the most draconian of laws on our constituents in lockstep with the vaccination programme. When we have vaccinated the highest-risk groups, what will we do? When we have completed phase one by vaccinating all those with above-average risk by late March, what will we then do? Put another way, how does success in vaccine delivery translate into a return to normal? What is the exit strategy? The public have put up with an awful lot. The vast majority of them have done exactly what we asked. They need hope, they need to see a path out of this, and then we can attempt to make sure that 2021 really is not the new 2020.

4.21 pm

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con) [V]: Like my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), I want to focus my remarks on what happens when we have vaccinated the most vulnerable.

Before I do so, I want to make a case for one particular industry and profession that has been very hard hit by lockdown: the private hire and taxi industry. At the weekend I spoke at a virtual meeting to Mr Imran and Mr Jamil of the Peterborough Private Hire Association. They told me that many taxi drivers in the city have seen

[Paul Bristow]

their incomes drop dramatically as a result of lockdown to just a fraction of what they were before the pandemic. People are rightly staying at home, but self-employed taxi drivers cannot stop working, because they have to take patients to hospitals and key workers to work. They are not classed as key workers, even though they have to work. There is no school run, there is no night-time economy, and people are not going to work in big numbers. I have written to Peterborough City Council asking if it will use the additional revenue grant to support them during this third lockdown.

This third lockdown can only really be justified by a need to pause things to buy time in order to carry out the vaccination programme, so that there is an end—a proper end—to this crisis and things can open up again. I hear the arguments that vaccinating the elderly and the most vulnerable will not necessarily end this crisis. No one is doubting the scale of the challenges that our NHS faces, particularly in our hospitals, but we must be able to discuss what life looks like with a vaccinated population, and if and when we can get to the point where covid-19 can be treated in the same way as flu.

The Government have confirmed that over 88% of covid fatalities are from the top four groups identified by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation—the very people we need to have been vaccinated by the middle of February—so it is at this point that we need to begin to try to lift these restrictions and, as I say, talk about what life may look like after we have a vaccinated population. As the Minister said, some people have been through hell and back, but we have to look at what life looks like post vaccination. The end is near; we are nearly there. So let us start talking. Let us not prolong lockdown any longer than is necessary. Let us open up the economy so that we can begin to raise taxes to pay for our NHS and the vital public services that we have relied on.

4.24 pm

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab) [V]: We stand on the precipice of what many experts warn will be the darkest days in the long war on covid-19. There are now 62% more patients in hospital with covid than at the peak of the first wave. In London, the Mayor has been forced to declare a major incident, with hospitals cancelling potentially life-saving cancer surgeries, and in Liverpool city region, one in 100 people tested positive for this terrible virus last week.

Like other Members, I want to thank the nurses, doctors, carers and other healthcare professionals who have put their lives on the line every single day of this pandemic. With this country in the midst of its greatest crisis since the second world war, they have exemplified the very best of humanity: heroically brave and selflessly committed to the wellbeing of others. So too should we thank the supermarket workers, teachers and cleaners who have kept our country going while so many of us have stayed at home. This crisis has shown us that the real national heroes are not the bankers or the CEOs but, too often, the lowest paid and least recognised in our society, and it is time we fixed that.

For the moment, the best way in which we can do that is to thank key workers by following public health guidance. We all have a responsibility to stay at home, maintain social distancing and protect the NHS. When

doctors and nurses working on the frontline beg us to play our part, we must listen. We must also recognise that people can only stay at home if they can afford to do so, and it is incumbent on all of us who have the great privilege of serving in this House to ensure that everyone has the financial support they so desperately need. That is why, in March last year, my party called on the Government to put in place a comprehensive package of support for workers who have been impacted by the pandemic.

The extension of the furlough scheme in the autumn was undoubtedly a welcome development. However, while many of our eastern and European partners have put in place far-reaching programmes aimed at combating unemployment, this Government have instead given us months of uncertainty, chaotic U-turns and broken promises. Too many people are being asked to choose between curbing the spread of covid and putting food on the table. Nearly a year after the pandemic first struck, there are still almost 3 million British taxpayers who have yet to receive a penny of financial support. Instead, they have been told to join the millions of households claiming universal credit—a pitiful amount that Ministers admit they could not live on.

The Government are even threatening to cut the £20 uplift in universal credit in two months' time. I will not be alone in having been inundated by constituents telling me that they do not know how they and their families will survive if their payments are reduced any further. It is an utterly shameful proposal. I urge Ministers to ensure that there is no detriment to welfare payments at a time of such great economic hardship. I would also like to express my support for the Leader of the Opposition's call for a flexible furlough scheme that allows parents to meet their childcare responsibility and alleviates the considerable pressure on our schools.

4.27 pm

Mrs Heather Wheeler (South Derbyshire) (Con) [V]: It is a pleasure to speak again today about covid-related matters. To be frank, the supply of the vaccine in South Derbyshire has been slow, but now the area is gearing up. Those in the northern part of the constituency are being invited to the Derby Arena—the velodrome—which I am extremely pleased is up and running, and from the end of this week, we will have a stand-alone centre in Swadlincote. That is an area of 50,000 people, and only those in the top four tranches will be invited as soon as possible. It has taken a lot of kicking and screaming to get to this point, and when we do a national review of how things have happened, we will also need to do a local review. However, we are getting there now.

I would also like to talk about where we need to be going on the mental health side of things, particularly for the people who feel that they have been forgotten about financially. We have sent the Chancellor a couple of new ideas about the directors' income support scheme and other matters, such as the money coming back from supermarkets. It is not just a financial matter. I am concerned about the mental health of some of the constituents I am receiving emails from, and I will be negotiating again an uplift in mental health services for the people of South Derbyshire who need them in these extraordinary times.

I will not go on for long because there are lots of speakers, and some people have missed out in these debates. I will wrap up now by saying a huge thank you

to our shopworkers, frontline services, NHS, ambulance people and everyone who keeps the show on the road. It has been a massive community effort. In South Derbyshire, we have rapid lateral flow tests and we will have the sites for the vaccines. That will make a huge difference to everyone's feeling about finding a way out. I end with my grateful thanks for everything that everyone is doing.

4.30 pm

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP) [V]: I do not think it is controversial to say that we are not in a place where any of us would choose to be right now. It is not a time for taunts about U-turns or to respond with personal or flippant remarks; our constituents need grown-ups in the room.

The Secretary of State requests that the House get behind his decision, but if he is to achieve that his approach must change. There needs to be less personal attack and greater clarity. We all need to listen more carefully to voices whose opinions differ from ours, from the frontline to the experts and all Members of this place.

I am as determined as the next right hon. or hon. Member to see the back of the pandemic. With more than 7,000 excess deaths since March 2020 in England alone, not one of us should want to prolong this tragic loss of life. But without a realistic and determined strategy, we risk continued failure to contain the threat. If all Members are to truly get behind any such strategy, it must be forged with as broad a consensus as possible—cross-party and respectfully with the devolved Governments. I firmly believe that that is the only way we can move towards an end to this crisis and the elimination of community transmission.

Such planning should encompass all relevant areas of Government, ensuring that disbursement of financial support always results in equitable consequentials. There must be some movement from the Government to address the devastation inflicted on the 3 million who have been excluded from support; repeatedly telling them how generous the Government have been to everyone else only serves to pour more salt on their wounds and lacks any semblance of humanity. The compelling case for the retention of the extension to legacy benefits, the £20 universal credit uplift, is a move supported by 60% of people across the UK. Indeed, there is a well-trodden shopping list of issues that some in this House would argue a case for, and I believe that they do so for the most honourable of reasons.

The most pressing of matters, of course, is our direct response to the threat of the virus to life. We know that we cannot firefight our way out of this current position, if that is how we got to this place. Vaccines are welcome, but the science has yet to bear out their impact on the transmission of coronavirus. As the virus remains prevalent and circulating in the community, the risk of further mutation remains.

NHS England chief executive Sir Simon Stevens said that this has been “the toughest year” that any staff member “can remember”, and that NHS England is back in the “eye of the storm” that it faced earlier last year. The handclapping on the doorstep and the warm words of appreciation ring hollow without recognition and proper reward. The resilience of cancer services has

again been severely tested, and Parliament must consider, monitor and scrutinise the short-termism of the cancer recovery plan. We need a plan for the future, and it needs to be one with consensus.

4.33 pm

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con) [V]: I greatly appreciate the chance to contribute my local experience.

In my constituency, two more people died yesterday, thousands have caught the disease and it is getting worse, even in the remotest depths of rural Somerset. We face a vicious enemy that attacks without warning and has the power to exploit even the smallest human error. Let down our mask or hug the grandchildren, and we could—I am sorry to say it—die. No one likes lockdown, but obeying the rules is vital, and so is setting a positive public image.

It is a great pity that Somerset County Council is still planning to run public surveys about local government reform, while the daily death toll across the county continues to rise. The Government gave Somerset an extra £32 million to tackle covid; £10 million—I repeat, £10 million—went straight into the council's reserves. It even had the barefaced cheek to shift almost £0.5 million into a savings fund for its own car parks. What a cheap trick! Words fail me at the lack of decency and care for people's real interests and needs.

We all know that Ministers have long-term plans to reform local government, but this is no time for the county council in Somerset to be cooking the books to make themselves look like financial wizards. As for the county council wasting time on surveys, which it is now planning to do right through January and February, how dare it treat us with contempt? It will be pestering people who are frightened by a disease that is still spreading fast.

The county has put the districts in an impossible position. They would much prefer to leave this alone until such time as the pandemic is over, but the county council insists on wasting public money and running consultations, and the districts are seriously expected to carry on as though nothing has happened. The Government need to take the lead to completely freeze this whole local government reform programme.

So far, worldwide, almost 2 million human beings have been killed by covid. In this country, the death toll tonight is more than 82,000—the population of my constituency. One day, our descendants may ask, “What did you do in the pandemic?” I really do not believe that any self-respecting Minister will want to admit responsibility by saying, “I pushed ahead with local government reform.” It is irrelevant. It is an unnecessary sideshow while so many of our residents are desperately trying to protect their own lives and those of their loved ones.

We hope and pray for a swift roll-out of the new vaccines. Some teething problems are inevitable, and in Somerset there are elements that have been delayed, so I have a positive and constructive suggestion for the Minister. Why not report vaccines in the same way as infections: area by area, week by week, day by day? We would like to know exactly how many jabs have been given across our county and who is getting them. If the Minister could do that, it would make all our lives easier.

4.36 pm

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab) [V]: This crisis has created unbearable pressure on our nurses, doctors and hospital leaders, and I want to thank them for all they do. Many NHS staff are effectively the walking wounded. They have been operational without a break, exhausted, stressed and traumatised, for so long. Today, I want assurances that when decisions are made about how and when to end this lockdown, Ministers will be guided only by science, resources and the trajectory of the virus.

When staff are so stretched, local decision making about resources is paramount. Last week, we learned that the Nightingale in Newham is to be open for patients as well as for vaccination, but there is suspicion in my patch that some decisions are not based on clinical need, because there have never been enough staff to run the Nightingale at a reasonable capacity. We are struggling to staff the facilities that we have got. Where are all these additional medics coming from? We need sensible local decisions. For heaven's sake, we have the highest infection rate in London.

I know that we have absolutely no choice but to lock down hard to save lives, but that has to be matched with fair support for all. I am thinking especially about the hospitality, events and cultural sector, which is struggling. The wedding industry is huge in Newham. It has had to push back the time when it can take bookings again, and it is struggling. So is the supply chain and its employees, and wedding dress shops, caterers and jewellers too.

We pray that the vaccine programme works, and that it works rapidly, but vulnerable sectors in our economy will need support for months. Yesterday, however, the Chancellor offered no additional support—nothing new to protect struggling sectors of the economy, nothing for struggling families, and still absolutely nothing for those excluded from support time and again. Why did he bother to turn up?

Why are we seeing children living in poverty still with no IT devices or broadband, and why are they now being cheated out of food that the public purse paid for? Surely every single Member has seen the paltry rations we are told 30 quid pays for. Seriously, where are they shopping? We knew for months that this moment was coming again. This ain't our first lockdown—we knew what the implications would be. There are absolutely no excuses for constantly doing too little, too late.

4.39 pm

Dr Jamie Wallis (Bridgend) (Con) [V]: Until recently, Bridgend had the highest infection rate in the entire country. I would therefore like to take this opportunity to say to everyone there, and to everyone considering visiting one of the popular tourist areas of Bridgend and Porthcawl, please stay at home, protect the NHS and save lives.

I have just a few short points to make and will be as quick as I can. On immunisations, the speed at which the vaccinations have been made available is truly remarkable. The Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine is testimony to the excellent science and research and development that we have in this country. Equally remarkable is our progress so far against the immunisation schedule—an ambitious schedule: we have already vaccinated 2.3 million

people, I think, with 2.6 million doses. That is encouraging; it is a welcome achievement. It underlines the difference between how we are all feeling now with how we were feeling in March. There is light at the end of the tunnel and an end in sight.

My constituents are anxious to better understand that end and how the vaccine roll-out will translate into the return of their freedoms, the opening up of their businesses and the return of their children to schools and colleges. It is reasonable that now we have a vaccine and an achievable immunisation schedule, which will hopefully lead to us preventing just under 90% of deaths by 15 February, we should be able to provide those answers. I ask for that information to be made available and that the road map to normalcy is made clearer as soon as possible.

My constituents also contact me about the rules and restrictions in place. To them I say: this is an unprecedented crisis. Tens of thousands of Britons have lost their lives and clearly the Government are right to take action to control the spread of this deadly virus, but those actions have been and are being informed by data and modelling that have not been published. That is a real shame because it means the data and modelling have not been subjected to review by academic peers, experts or—most importantly—the public themselves.

Finally, many constituents have contacted me to express disappointment at how different parts of the UK have dealt with the pandemic and how that has led to confusion. I always urge them to follow local rules, but I sincerely hope that we face our next challenge as global Britain and one United Kingdom.

4.42 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab) [V]: In the midst of this most critical situation, I start by paying huge tribute to NHS and care staff from Aneurin Bevan University Health Board, those organising the vaccines and all keyworkers out there in Newport East on the frontline, in the most stressful and challenging of circumstances.

In Wales, 3,997 people to date have tragically lost their lives. Our thoughts are with their families and friends for their loss and pain. It has never been more important to heed the calls to stay at home and keep each other safe. I have some points to raise with Ministers in the limited time I have.

As a Welsh Member, I pay tribute to Welsh Government Ministers and their strong leadership. So often, the pattern has been that the Welsh Government have made the difficult decisions first, only to see others follow later, but I remind Ministers that the Treasury is the Treasury for the whole UK, not just England.

In autumn, when Wales went into a firebreak first, the Tory Government would not extend the job retention scheme, yet when England went into its second lockdown the Treasury U-turned and ensured that support was in place. The Welsh Government took the difficult but justified decision to move Wales to level 4 in December because of the new strain—there was some opposition from the Government Benches to that—but it was not until England locked down last week that additional funding was mentioned. Then it emerged that the money announced for Wales was not new money at all, but money already announced last year. We have seen that pattern repeated throughout the pandemic. We should not forget

that we ended 2020 in the UK with one of the worst death tolls in Europe and the deepest recession of any major economy. That was not inevitable; it was a consequence of the Prime Minister's repeated delay in choices.

I urge Ministers to do more to help the 3 million people in the UK who have been excluded from UK Government support schemes. Many will soon have been a year without support, including constituents of mine such as the woman whose employer chose not to take part in the furlough scheme, the newly self-employed beautician and the company director of the small business who is paid via dividends. There was some speculation last week that there may be some movement on this, but our constituents need help as soon as possible, including new starters, those who have been on parental leave and others.

We must see more action for those who rely on the social security system. We are in the worst recession for 300 years, and family incomes are under huge strain. Why are the Government looking to cut universal credit by £1,000 for 6 million families? In Newport East, 8,812 families will take a hit if the cut goes ahead in April. Ministers must rule that out now, end the five-week wait, provide a £20 uplift to legacy benefits and change advances for loans. Action is needed quickly.

Finally, this is a critical time for the steel industry. It would be really helpful if Ministers could update us on talks with Tata about short-term support in this crisis, on Tata's changes and on the long-term strategy for our steel industry.

4.45 pm

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): I thank the Minister for Health for the way in which he opened the debate, with a sense of respect for people with all sorts of opinions on this matter. We ought to be able to reflect different views as part of a healthy debate. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox), who is not here at the moment, for speaking about the importance of the use of data, and ensuring that it is not manipulated or abused.

From the very beginning the Government have had a clear plan for how we leave this awful cycle of lockdowns, and it has always been through vaccinations. That goal is now being delivered. We are at a very early stage of the process and it may be lumpy, but there is that commitment to have 13 million of the most vulnerable people in the country at least offered the vaccination by mid-February. The vast majority of those people will take up that offer. In fact, 85% of people expressed an opinion that they wish to take up the vaccination if it is offered. We can see a clear way out once those first four cohorts have the vaccination by mid-February, with two more weeks in order for the vaccination to take its full effect.

With that success, we should all expect to see a reduction or a lightening of the load in terms of the lockdown. People have carried this burden through all this time, since March last year; they need to see the light at the end of the tunnel, and the lightening of the lockdown restrictions following the success of the Government's vaccination programme. Many of my constituents are enthusiastically looking forward to their vaccinations, especially in Horwich, where they are looking forward to the use of Bolton Wanderers' football ground, the Macron stadium, for this purpose. Hopefully the Minister will be able to comment on whether the ground is going

to be used for the inoculation programme. The Royal Bolton Hospital and Wrightington, Wigan and Leigh NHS Foundation Trust are doing an enormous amount of good work. I pay tribute to everyone working in shops, the council, hospitals or care services for the work that they are doing. But with the first goal of delivering the vaccination, we also need to see the lightening of the lockdown load.

The third goal—to get the hat trick—ought to be consideration of whether we need to renew the Coronavirus Act 2020. By renewing it, we set out for many people a fear that lockdown will be resumed in the autumn. By not renewing it, we are telling people, “You can resume your education. You can start your business again. You can feel confident of getting that health treatment,” and we get that recovery going.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call Catherine West next, but Jim Shannon ought to be on standby, because we have a problem with the following speaker's video link.

4.49 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): It goes without saying that we must use this opportunity to thank all our public health workers, as well as our journalists and broadcasters. My favourite is Victoria Macdonald from Channel 4, who seems to portray the pain and suffering and yet the strength and solidarity of our health workers; a huge thank you to all our broadcasters and journalists, who are doing such a good job of keeping us informed.

I regret that the Government did not tackle soon enough a review back in the summer of what went wrong in the first wave, which in my view has led to our being in a third wave. Had we had an effective review in the summer and, for example, introduced testing in schools on 1 September, we might not be in the situation that we are in now.

On the question of long covid, I am on the all-party group, with many Members from across the House. We know that there is not a proper care pathway. I think of a 40-year-old constituent of mine who has not recovered, even though he suffered from covid last April. It is now coming up to 10 months and he still has not seen a specialist because he was never in accident and emergency and within a proper care pathway. We must urgently address that dreadful long-covid syndrome, which is affecting so many people who are recovering from covid.

I put on record my regret that we did not tackle the isolation strategy with enough energy, and with enough understanding of the lives of people who work in insecure roles, who desperately need to be compensated, whether for taxi driving or being a security guard. In all those insecure jobs, they need to be paid to stay at home. I also put on record, as many have in the debate, the 3 million excluded. It is probably more than 3 million. The work of the all-party group is very important, but it is particularly the creative sector that is terribly affected by the covid crisis. It has been going on for several months. People feel that there is no way out and they are feeling absolutely desperate.

In particular, I ask the Minister, first, whether nurseries will stay open. If they do, will nursery nurses be put forward for early vaccinations? Will dentists be higher up the list? They are very at risk because of their work,

[Catherine West]

in terms of the covid germs. No. 3 is optometrists and then, of course, other professionals such as teachers. Also, prisoners, prison officers and prison educators are very much at risk of covid. Will the Minister please take back to the Justice Secretary the question of whether classes in prisons should be going ahead at the moment? I would not want anyone not to be protected from this terrible virus.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): We are just going to see whether we have the electricians sorted out at Sir Geoffrey's place.

4.52 pm

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): There was a time when I did not think that I was going to get on, but I am back, so thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The first vaccine dose has now been supplied to more than 2.2 million people. That is more than the whole of the rest of Europe put together—a brilliant start to this in huge programme to vaccinate a significant proportion of the United Kingdom's people. I thank our healthcare workers in Gloucestershire, who have been working very hard since Christmas to meet the four priority groups by mid-February. I understand that most care home residents and workers will be vaccinated by the end of this week—a fantastic achievement.

We must make a comprehensive plan this year for our schools. I received a number of detailed questions from my constituents on the curriculum to be adopted. For example, is Ofqual considering the idea of grades being announced earlier this year to provide certainty and time if needed to appeal the grades? Will some form of mini-exam or coursework on the content learned be expected to help in grading accurately? What will be the plan for students who do not take normal exams, for example, those on apprenticeships, or the new T-levels being trialled at Cirencester College? We now have enough information to make those decisions. We should make them and adhere to them. Clarity must be provided for schools, parents and pupils, with all Government communications and websites being clear and not contradictory.

The vaccine programme has the makings of being a great British success, as we build on a strong medical manufacturing base in future. We are now world leaders in the new ribonucleic acid technology, which should enable vaccines to be made for not just covid but a wide range of viruses. From yesterday's Public Accounts Committee session on the vaccine programme, the immense skill and knowledge of Kate Bingham and her taskforce were well and truly apparent. When they started their work in May they were not sure whether they would be able to develop a vaccine, let alone where it would come from. Yet the vaccine trial has now been successfully launched, with 267 million doses contracted from five companies at a cost of £2.9 billion. It is an amazing achievement.

The strong message of recovery now needs to come from the Government, encouraging everyone to take up the vaccination so that we can enable individuals, schools, hospitals and, above all, businesses to have a well-overdue return to normal life.

4.55 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I shall say just a few words. As I have listened to the others who have spoken, I have become aware that the fears of my constituency, Strangford, are replicated throughout the UK. We must remember that light dispels the darkness.

I plea for communication, particularly in relation to the teachers who have sometimes been unsure of what has been happening. It would be better if they had an email to tell them in advance what they could then tell parents.

I thank GPs for all that they are doing in relation to the vaccine roll-out. I make a plea again for the pharmacies, because they are well placed and well located and also have the ability to deliver the vaccines, if they get the opportunity.

The postmen and postwomen who have done their duty during their rounds deserve a lot of credit. Their work is necessary and it is essential that we provide them with support.

I thank all the workers who have come out of retirement—the doctors, nurses and careworkers—to carry out admin duties or to muck in and carry out work on the wards, and also those who have been vaccinated. Given the pressure that the NHS is under, it is essential that discussions are held. Perhaps the Minister could give some indication of what discussions have been held with private hospitals to secure beds and assistance throughout the United Kingdom.

On teachers again, last week I made a plea to the Secretary of State directly for teachers to be made a priority case, along with those who continue to work in nurseries and special schools during this strict lockdown. It is important that their role is recognised and that they are prioritised when it comes to the vaccine.

We must ensure that the vulnerable who have additional learning needs receive additional help and support as a matter of urgency. Although it is great to hear of the offer of learning tools, schools must have access to such tools so that they can give them to vulnerable children immediately, not later.

This is not the responsibility of the Minister, the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), but I stress that the issue is not just covid-19 but the fact that because of the Northern Ireland protocol we are seeing numerous empty shelves and businesses on the brink. People in Northern Ireland are fearful once again that they will not have the bare essentials. The issue is very clear for us. It is not the Minister's responsibility, but the complications we have with the protocol add to the situation when it comes to covid-19.

Cancer waiting lists need to be addressed. The Minister is in her place and I know that she is totally committed, so I make that plea again.

We are quickly approaching a year of dealing with coronavirus. For some this has been a year of isolation, for some a year of fear and for some a long time mourning in these strange times. We are approaching the end of the journey, but we are not there yet. We need to bring people through with messages of truth, hope and positivity, and to do as we did at the start of this journey: pull together. The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—always better together.

4.57 pm

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con) [V]: Aldous Huxley wrote that the 20th century plague was not the black death, but rather the grey life. He could have been describing life under covid-19. When I was elected a year ago, I did not set out to take away freedoms, or to shut down businesses and close schools, but to save lives we have had no choice but to live much of a grey life this last year.

My priority has been to support residents and businesses locally throughout this pandemic, helping tens of thousands who have written to me. But now, my priority is making sure that I help those still in need and that we have a road out of national lockdown, which the vaccine gives us. We already have three vaccination centres in Rutland and Melton, and almost 50,000 people across our primary care networks have been vaccinated.

As we see the light at the end of the tunnel, I thank all those in Rutland and Melton who have borne the costs with such grace and selflessness over the last year—those who have helped each other under the toughest domestic conditions we have seen since the war. In particular, I wish to recognise Tim Weston and his fellow teachers and students at Oakham School, and Rutland Plastics. In the first lockdown, they made so many tens of thousands of visors that I arranged the delivery of masks to hospitals and settings all around the country.

I also wish to recognise Stuart and Holly East, who own the Old White Hart pub in Lyddington and cooked 300 meals a day for NHS staff; Tony Fowler, the local milkman who spent his breaks shopping for isolated residents; Governor Neil Thomas, who rightly received an OBE for his work, and his prison officers and staff at HMP Stocken; and, finally, our wonderful soldiers across Rutland and Melton, who ran pop-up testing sites around the east midlands. But there are so many more I wish to praise, including Clawson Kindness, Sharon Brown and Rutland Sewing. These are all people who have set about helping others without any thought for their own recognition. They are the unsung heroes of Rutland and Melton and the very best of Britain.

I also appreciate the extraordinary sacrifices of our police and our health and care staff, both formal and informal carers, and our council staff. Our healthcare workers have worked tirelessly to save lives, and I am enormously grateful, but we must also remember those who are often forgotten in our shops, our binmen and those in unseen roles. I would also like to recognise our businesses, shops and traders who have forgone profits to keep covid rates down.

Finally, I want to thank the hundreds, if not thousands, of women who have written to me asking for little more than that their partners be with them at pregnancy scans and when they give birth. I am proud to have fought for them, and I want to thank the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and the Prime Minister for their support on this issue. I am also pleased to have lobbied Ministers to secure the exemption for children under five from the rules on two adults meeting in public during the lockdown, because we had to ensure that the most vulnerable did not suffer most at this time. Now we must focus on returning to normality, giving people back their freedoms as soon as possible and ensuring that our recovery is as fast and equitable as possible. Thank you again to everyone in Rutland and Melton who has worked so hard to defeat the virus.

5 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Covid and its mismanagement are hurting my city of Hull and the East Riding, and without fair and adequate support from Government, I fear for the future of jobs, particularly in the hospitality and entertainment sector. I have already raised the incredible work on marine conservation being done by the Deep, and its incredibly challenging financial situation. All the animals still need caring for, feeding and looking after, but the Deep's doors remain shut and its income remains at zero.

Hull Trains, an open-access rail operator, has again stopped its direct rail service through to London and faces an uncertain future. It is unfathomable that other cities would see their only direct route to the capital cancelled, yet the Government are content to allow this to happen to Hull. I hope that they have not also forgotten about our other businesses, or about the impact on our cinemas, bowling alleys, Hull Truck Theatre, Hull New Theatre, Hull FC rugby club and Hull City football club. When large businesses such as those suffer, our city suffers—and not just our economy but our morale too. I have submitted many written questions to the Government about this, because it is an issue of fairness. I will not allow the Government to choke off our chances of recovery and cut us off from opportunity.

The impact of the covid-19 pandemic on pubs and breweries has been nothing short of catastrophic. They have been messed about during the pandemic, and they do not know if they are coming or going. At one point the Prime Minister was encouraging people, saying that it was their patriotic duty to go to the pub and that they should eat out to help out. Pubs then spent a fortune making their premises covid-secure, only to be told, "Oh, you're unsafe. You must close." The uncertainty throughout the pandemic is having a damaging impact on people's mental health. The Government must start planning beyond next week and take a serious long-term look at all the problems facing industry. Pubs and breweries need a road map that sets out a path that combines the necessary immediate support with the continuing economic stimulus needed throughout 2021.

Finally, I want to highlight two pubs in my constituency. The Hop and Vine basement bar in Hull has contacted me to ask if it can be allowed to do off-sales again. This made a difference previously, and the bar is at a loss as to why it is not allowed now. My constituent Pete Wilkinson, the tenant landlord of the New Griffin on Anlaby Road, has told me a story of the incompetence of Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs when he requested something as simple as the required tax code to get his payroll up and running, and I hope the Minister will put me in touch with the relevant person so we can get this resolved. I have never asked for special treatment for Hull West and Hessle. We just want to be treated fairly so that we can save jobs and businesses and ensure that we come out of the pandemic fighting and ready to bring on the rest of this year.

5.3 pm

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): The Minister ordinarily has a rather pessimistic speech inflicted on her when I rise in the House, but today I want to strike a different tone, because the whole country can now see that we have a moment of opportunity, a moment of hope and a route out of these persistent lockdowns.

[Mr William Wragg]

I can report that in Stockport, my home town and the borough of my constituency, all the over-80s and care home residents will have received at least their first jab by this Friday. I am grateful that Stockport has honoured the commitment that was given to those who received their first jab that they would receive their second one. I know that there is considerable public debate about that, but that was quite helpful in allaying some of their concerns. Good progress is indeed being made with the roll-out of vaccination. I pay particular tribute to those at Stepping Hill Hospital and the many GP practices across my constituency. Indeed, in Greater Manchester, that has recently been augmented by the vaccine centre at the tennis centre. I particularly mention on this one occasion my mum, who has come out of retirement to help with vaccines at that centre.

May I briefly ask the Minister about matters around data, particularly the need to update and clarify explanatory notes on the dashboard for vaccination statistics? It would be helpful to have a breakdown of data on those who have been vaccinated according to the nine priority groups of vulnerable people, with running percentages on progress made. Indeed, we could provide local breakdowns of data, perhaps to inculcate a sense of civic pride if not competition, and the need to make further progress. Most seriously, that could highlight problem areas so that extra focus can be given and extra resource made available.

I echo calls not for a timetable as to how we can ease lockdown but, rather, milestones—the course of the virus does not follow a timetable. At least having measurable progress, with milestones reached, would allow people to stick with the impositions of lockdown, allow businesses to plan, and keep the Government's feet to the fire, showing that their singular focus is on the roll-out of the vaccine. I hope that those words of encouragement will meet with the approval of my hon. Friend the Minister.

5.6 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green) [V]: There is so much that could be said about the Government's chronic mishandling of the pandemic; their failure to act swiftly enough and learn from their mistakes; the obsession with failing, centralised, private sector-led approaches; the cronyism and chumocracy that have wasted so much money and left so many frontline workers exposed to danger—something that I am seeking to highlight through a cross-party court case; their continued failure to fix our test, trace, isolate and support scheme; their derisory rates and conditions for statutory sick pay, which mean that many simply cannot afford to self-isolate; and the cruel exclusion of over 3 million workers from financial support.

Ten years of austerity, alongside the systematic fragmentation of the NHS, have left our country chronically ill-prepared to cope with the crisis. Existing inequalities have been laid bare and exacerbated. We may all be weathering the same storm, but we are in very different boats. For those reasons and more, I support calls for an independent public inquiry. As vice-chair of the all-party group on coronavirus I was pleased to contribute to our own inquiry, and I commend our report on how to achieve a covid-secure UK.

I want to focus, however, on an issue that has had far less coverage: the fact that, even as we struggle to cope with the pandemic, we continue to sow the seeds for the next one. Constant encroachment on the world's rainforests and other wild habitats has multiplied the risks of pathogens jumping from humans to animals, together with the global trade in wild animals and animal markets. Some may say that mid-pandemic is not the time to take action to prevent the next one. I would argue that the longer we delay, the more certain those future pandemics will be.

The recent report from the intergovernmental platform on biodiversity could not be more stark. It says that if we continue as we are:

“Future pandemics will emerge more often, spread more rapidly, do more damage to the world economy and kill more people than COVID-19”.

It calls for “a seismic shift” from reaction to prevention, noting that the economic cost of pandemics is 100 times more than reducing risk in the first place. Chillingly, it estimates that another 1.7 million undiscovered viruses exist in mammals and birds, of which up to 827,000 could have the ability to infect people.

Crucially, the same human activities that drive climate change and biodiversity loss drive pandemic risk, including the expansion and intensification of agriculture, and unsustainable trade, production and consumption. There are two areas where the Government must act. First, stronger deforestation provisions are needed in the Environment Bill. The due diligence obligation must apply to all unsustainable forest risk commodities; and the whole UK economy, not just supply chains, must be deforestation free by 2030. Secondly, we must stop the finance sector bankrolling deforestation and biodiversity destruction linked to industrial livestock. The Government say that they have put £3 billion towards biodiversity, raided from the aid budget, but that is nothing compared with the £380 billion that has been spent over five years, bankrolled by Barclays, HSBC and others. The Government must act, and do it now.

5.9 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): As I was waiting in the Library for this debate to start, I happened to notice on the shelves a book about Edmund Burke, and as this debate is about the balance between the freedom of the individual and the authority of the Government, I opened it at random and I found this quote:

“The Mass of Mankind are made to be led by others. Habits & Customs are their support, because it would be impossible that civil Society could subsist long if we were all Philosophers. Subordination, therefore, is necessary for the human mind.”

My question is whether that is actually correct. I believe that conservatism—and I put the emphasis on conservatism as a philosophy; I am not just talking about the Conservative Government—is about freedom and trusting the individual and individual authority.

People ask me why I have gone along with this so far, and it is for one reason only: we are told that the NHS—because so many beds, wrongly, have been stripped from the NHS over the last 10 years—was in danger of falling down, so that should be the approach of the Government. If we are to restrict people's freedom, we should only do it because we are worried that the NHS may lose capacity, and people may be arriving in hospital

and there is not the capacity to treat them. We should learn the lessons from this pandemic. We should restrict civil liberties for as short a time as possible and as little as possible, because that is fundamentally what we believe in, although it may be necessary for a short time.

What should be the approach now? It should be a tiered approach. It should always have been a tiered approach. Looking at every region and every hospital, we should ask ourselves whether the NHS was in danger of not having capacity in that local area, and then we should have brought in local lockdowns for that area. As soon as a vaccination programme rolls out, we must move to a tiered approach.

When next winter comes, we have to accept that there is a difference between morbidity and mortality. People do die: 20,000 or 30,000 people a year die, very sadly, from flu. Next winter we cannot close down the entire country. We have to have some regard for freedom and the ability of people to make informed decisions about their own lives.

The real risk of this pandemic is overwhelmingly to people who are over 80. They are the people whom we should be protecting and they are the people whom we should be vaccinating, and we have to allow the rest of society to get on with their own business and to preserve their freedoms.

5.12 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD) [V]: Professor Stephen Reicher, a member of the behavioural advisory group for SAGE and professor of psychology at the University of St Andrews in my constituency, said at the weekend that contrary to the impression we might get from reports, the reality is that about 90% of the public are complying with the restrictions to date, and indeed one of the success stories has been that public compliance. Where people do not comply, and I am not talking about the very small core of those who are blatantly flouting the rules, it is generally because of practicalities or lack of information—it is about complexity—and I do very much agree with the professor's analysis.

The public health messaging in all parts of the UK, including in Scotland and in England, has undoubtedly been complex because it has become clear that these varied and complex systems are too often not backed up with the appropriate support. In North East Fife, where so much of the hospitality industry relies on tourists from outside the area, businesses are struggling. A case in point is the Peat Inn, a restaurant in my constituency that, in 2020, was ranked at No. 23 in its list of the top 50 restaurants in Britain by "The Good Food Guide". It has a Michelin star and, as Members may imagine, it is very much an attraction. As soon as Fife went into level 3, meaning that nobody outside Fife could travel into the kingdom and restaurants were not allowed to serve alcohol, the Peat Inn understandably decided it was no longer profitable for it to remain open. Its head chef, Nick Briggs, told me that he felt hospitality was being "unfairly singled out" and being made to jump through hoops.

Of course, because the Peat Inn generates tourism for North East Fife, the fact that it was forced to close has had an impact on other local businesses. The Tarskavaig B&B, which is about 1 mile down the road from the restaurant, also got in touch with me. Its business is at

least 50% Peat Inn customers, so when the Peat Inn shut, all but one of its bookings was cancelled. The owners have really struggled for support anyway. As they pay council tax rather than rates, they have been ineligible for the hardship funds and rates relief. They have been excluded from support. In all these general debates, we have talked a lot about those who have been excluded, and I continue to urge the Government to do more. There will be many more small businesses like the Tarskavaig B&B across Scotland and the rest of the UK, and many more restaurants like the Peat Inn.

Many of the small business owners in my constituency are still waiting to access some of the £185 million of funding that was announced by the Scottish Government in early December. My constituency team and I were very pleased to hear the Scottish Government's confirmation of support yesterday, but it is vital that these schemes get up and running as soon as possible. January is very difficult financially for many at the best of times.

It was disappointing to hear the Chancellor's statement yesterday. Last March, we accepted that support would be best delivered using existing mechanisms, but now we find ourselves in a third English lockdown relying on the same schemes that have not been sufficiently tweaked, modified or developed to cope with the later stage of the pandemic. It is not right. I say to the Government that now is not the time to step back from support. Now is the time to make sure that businesses are equipped with what they need to survive.

5.16 pm

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): Since 2010 the unfair and regressive economic and social policies implemented by this Government have perpetuated and, indeed, exacerbated the deep-rooted structural inequalities in our society. As a result, the past decade was marked by widening health inequalities, deteriorating health and stagnating and even declining life expectancy. This means that, even without the coronavirus pandemic, we started this new decade as a more inequitable, unequal and imbalanced society, which faced enormous challenges to help alleviate health inequalities, improve life chances and increase life expectancy. What the covid-19 outbreak has done is expose those health and wider societal inequalities and demonstrate quite starkly that the circumstances that a person is born into, that they grow up in and that they live their life in can have tangible consequences for their health. We know that coronavirus has had a disproportionate impact on many people who already face disadvantage and discrimination, and, sadly, it is becoming increasingly clear that the covid-19 outbreak has widened and will continue to widen existing health inequalities.

Similarly, we know that people who live in deprived areas have higher diagnosis, rates and death rates than those living in more affluent areas. Indeed, national and regional evidence shows that patterns of death from covid-19 correspond with patterns of deprivation. Most worryingly, the covid-19 pandemic has had a hugely disproportionate impact on people from black, Asian and minority ethnic groups. As somebody who represents a constituency where poverty and deprivation are entrenched in some communities and where residents from BAME groups make up a large proportion of the population, I can say that these statistics are extremely concerning.

[Colleen Fletcher]

In Coventry, men in the most deprived areas can expect to live an average of almost 11 years fewer than men from the most affluent areas, with the gap for women being more than eight years. These health inequalities are reinforced by high unemployment, poor quality housing, falling incomes, declining living standards, fuel poverty, air pollution, food bank reliance, and poorer educational opportunities. This means that many young people in my constituency are held back from birth when compared with peers in different areas of the country, all of which is a consequence of this Government's policy choices over the past 10 years.

We need the Government to commit to properly funding public health, the NHS, local authorities and others, so that we can tackle the deeply entrenched health inequalities that exist in our communities and mitigate the impact of the covid-19 pandemic. We also need the Government to take additional steps to tackle the root causes of the hugely disproportionate impact that coronavirus has had on our BAME communities. The Government cannot delay any longer. We need urgent action on health inequalities now.

5.19 pm

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con) [V]: We have done many more tests than many other countries, and I pay tribute to Ministers and the NHS for all the hard work that has gone into achieving that. We are now vaccinating many more people than in other countries. We have got ahead, and that is very good news. As the Government see the main way out for us to relax the controls as being the vaccination of many more people, we wish everyone every speed and success in rolling out those vaccines.

I also think congratulations are in order for finding two more treatments that can make a difference to the death rate and reduce the length of time people suffer with a severe form of the disease, but what about ivermectin, which some doctors in other countries say can also achieve good results and reduce the death rate? It would be useful to know what progress is being made with the UK tests and whether that might ever be a recommended treatment, because the more treatments we can have to cut the death rate the better.

I would also be interested to know what our experts think about why there have been such differential case rates and death rates around the world. Unfortunately, the UK has now joined the group of countries where the death rate is over 0.1% of the total population, which means quite a lot of deaths, as we know to our sorrow and cost. We have joined many other countries in that grouping, but why is it that countries like Sweden and Brazil have not yet got to 0.1% when some have been very critical of the way they have handled the virus, and why do many Asian countries seem to have got through with much less damage? What does the international research tell us about the reasons? Why is it, too, that a country such as Belgium has been blighted by such a high death rate and a pretty high case rate? Of course, testing more means that we identify more cases, but our case rate is still not one of the worst in the world, so clearly some of the actions taken are having a beneficial impact.

I also urge the Government to do rather more for the self-employed and small businesses. They are bearing the brunt of the economic damage of the policies being

pursued, and more could be done, particularly for those small businesses and the self-employed who have not received any help at all. Many of them are in business areas in which there have been closures for the best part of a year now, and in which social contact is very important for the business model, meaning their revenues are well down. We are going to need them, and we need a recovery fairly soon. So I wish every success to those doing the vaccinations, and I hope we can then lift some of the restrictions, because we want to have a vibrant small business and small enterprise sector available to power the recovery we so desperately need.

5.22 pm

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab) [V]: The year 2020 was a difficult one—a year like no other in my lifetime. The first stage of 2021 is proving to be even more challenging, with over 80,000 deaths, infections going through the roof and local hospitals in Cheshire and the Warrington area under tremendous pressure; I give my thanks and gratitude, like everybody else across the House, to our NHS professionals.

We now have the deepest recession in 300 years and the highest death rate in Europe because of Government incompetence. It is not by chance; it is the consequence of delay after delay, dither and mixed messages, and ignoring the expert advice until the very last minute again and again.

The vaccine is the way out. We have three approved vaccines, and the roll-out is happening in parts of my constituency as I speak. Residents in their 80s and 90s have spoken to me about their experience; they have rolled up their sleeves with a smile on their face and have got vaccinated for Britain. But in some parts of my constituency supply is not getting through; that must be fixed—that is my plea to the Minister.

The vaccination programme needs to be 24 hours and rising to 4 million a week as soon as possible, but the current crisis requires a social contract between the state and the citizens: stay at home, stick to the rules and save lives, and the Government will provide vaccinations and support for people and businesses. But that is where the Government are falling short. Rather than focusing solely on the behaviour of walkers with flasks of coffee, Ministers must get their own house in order—provide reasonable levels of sick pay so people can self-isolate, extend the furlough scheme to working parents now that schools are closed, provide support to the 3 million excluded and look after those who lost their jobs and homes through these difficult times.

Finally, in May—in just a matter of weeks—people should have the opportunity to go to the polls. While these elections are about vital local services, they will provide a verdict, a judgment on the Government's handling of this crisis. Do the Minister and the Government have the confidence to go to the electorate as planned, or will he delay democracy yet again?

5.25 pm

Imran Ahmad Khan (Wakefield) (Con) [V]: I thank the Prime Minister and the Minister for Vaccine Deployment for the efficacious enthusiasm that hallmarks their sterling work in establishing more than 1,400 inoculation centres and ensuring that the most vulnerable will all be able to receive a vaccine soon. It is this United

Kingdom's Conservative Government's splendid foresight in securing vaccines months ago, far in advance of certification and roll-out, that has made the UK the leading country for vaccinations in all Europe. I welcome the establishment of the large-scale covid vaccination centre that will shortly open in Wakefield.

I commend the Government's great ambition to ensure that the lives, livings and liberties of the British people will be swiftly returned. While we are on track to vaccinate all care home residents by the end of January, and everyone over 70 and the clinically extremely vulnerable by mid-February, the challenges we face and the hazards that covid-19 presents require us to ever widen our ambition. Furlough and the numerous emergency schemes implemented by the Government both support taxpayers and cost them billions of pounds every month. The nation's rapid and effective inoculation is the only way these fearsome costs will be tamed and our lamented routine returned. It is therefore imperative that everything is done to ensure that everyone receives the vaccine as early as possible. At this critical stage in the battle against covid, we must set ever more ambitious objectives and incentivise our dynamic private sector to capture them, rather than simply accepting prevailing limitations.

The financial and human cost of the pandemic justifies and demands a warlike effort in retaliation. The Adam Smith Institute recently released a report on how to effectively accelerate the UK's covid-19 vaccination programme. Providing a 24/7 vaccination service is one such proposal. Other recommendations include commissioning pharmacies to provide vaccine services, allowing walk-in services for spare appointments and doses and simplifying the recruitment process to maximise the number of volunteers in the UK's jab army. West Yorkshire alone has more than 540 community pharmacies with staff trained in giving vaccinations.

I wholeheartedly agree with our Prime Minister and Health Secretary, who both declared that our best route out of lockdown is through mass inoculation. That being right and true demands that our national strategy be one that strains every sinew and effectively leverages and employs every conceivable mechanism that it can to increase, improve and bolster the United Kingdom's vaccination campaign.

5.28 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I make the case this evening for the increased use of lateral flow tests. Some misgivings have already been expressed that they are inaccurate. Perhaps in the early days, and with improper use, they may well have been, but any process administered inappropriately and badly gives poor results. The fact is that the technology has moved on and people are better trained in their use; indeed, in recent months we have seen that they have improved. I urge the wider use of the tests to help inspire confidence and to help us unlock the lockdown. Their use should be encouraged by the hospitality sector, airlines, factories, retail and sport. They provide an immediate, effective and quick result that deems a person good to go, or not, as the case may be. Let us roll this out to help open our country, which is unfortunately locked down.

Secondly, I want to address the problem of our country now living in a state of fear and, in many instances, ignoring fact. Covid has made our country fearful and suspicious. We have a daily diet of bad news. We have a

generation now being encouraged to fret and worry. We have a duty to move our country beyond fear and to get it on to a message of hope. My catechism taught me that our chief end in life is to glorify God and to enjoy life in him forever. We are here to enjoy life, not to fear it, or to lock ourselves away from living it to its absolute fullest. Every effort to suppress fear must be made. However, the agenda of some is, unfortunately, about promoting fear and suspicion.

I wish also to call this evening for the unlocking of grassroots amateur football. Young males, in particular, are being locked away from positive, healthy wellbeing and interaction. Positive physical activity outside ought not to be stopped among young people who can be well supervised and managed. Tomorrow, a number of MPs will deliver to the Prime Minister a letter calling for the unlocking of youth amateur football, and I will be one of the signatories to that letter. I will leave in the Library this evening a letter from five senior clinicians in Northern Ireland, who wrote to me criticising the modelling on the R number. They show facts about the false hope of closing down personal services, hotels, hospitality and retail—actions that all have a moderate impact on driving down the R number. Keeping our country in lockdown is only suppressing, not stopping, this virus, and it is not the answer to the problem. Sir Van Morrison recently wrote and sang:

“We are not in this together.”

Some are being more harshly locked down than others. This House should fix that.

5.31 pm

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con) [V]: First, let me thank all the key workers in Meon Valley, who have worked tirelessly during the pandemic and continue to do so, especially those now working on the vaccine programme. Progress is really good; one third of my nursing homes should have been vaccinated by the end of the week, and most of the health and social care staff have also had the vaccine. I am confident that everyone over 80 will have been offered a vaccine shortly. The incredible Wickham surgery has done more than 2,600 injections so far, with a third of them for over-80s.

However, one group should be receiving the jab as soon as possible: our teachers. I am incredibly concerned that millions of children are missing out on the education they deserve and need, and I believe it can be delivered properly only in schools, colleges and universities, not online. I know the reason schools are shut: it is not because they are not safe, but because of the transmission of the virus. So it is disappointing to see unions, such as the National Education Union, politicising the pandemic, even though I know that individual headteachers and their staff have often ignored their unions and selflessly thought of their pupils rather than the politics. The situation is not working. Teachers are now in the invidious position of having up to 50% of the children in school because of key worker and vulnerable children rules, while also taking part in remote learning, which is incredibly difficult and time-consuming. There can be few winners from this position.

The mental health and welfare of children is also important. Schools provide an experience not only of education, but of friendship, physical play and lessons for life. The welfare, education and health of children

[Mrs Flick Drummond]

and young people matter above all else, and everything must be done to maintain them. Otherwise, we will be facing an educational disaster long after the pandemic is over. I have talked to brilliant headteachers in Meon Valley throughout the pandemic and they have wanted to keep schools open. Children were catching up fast before Christmas and will again, but that is not the case across the country. In many areas, children are missing from school and missing online lessons too. After the autumn half term, the Department for Education showed that attendance rates in secondary schools were as low as 77% in the midlands, with rates in other areas very similar. Initial research from the Education Policy Institute has found that pupils from disadvantaged areas are losing more days of schooling than those in wealthier areas. Vaccinating teachers now would be a game changer for schools and would allow pupils back full time after the February half-term. I urge that teachers be put on the vaccination priority list so that unions have no grounds to prevent schools from opening and teachers feel safe in their classrooms.

5.33 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I had arranged a speech about schoolchildren's access to the internet, but as I was sitting here waiting to speak, I decided that I wanted to say to the House, to the Minister and to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, that I have become increasingly alarmed at comments from Ministers, and comments in the papers and the rest of the media in the past few days, driving the message that people are not following the rules. This has been in order to make people feel bad about themselves. However, when I look at the places in London that I know have the highest rates of coronavirus, I see a straight line to poverty. I suggest to the Minister that if we actually want to drive down rates further, we have to give more support to people to self-isolate if they are contacted by Test and Trace and told that they have been near somebody who has got coronavirus. If we want to encourage carers and support workers to take up lateral flow tests, we have to give them the support to do it. Who wants to know that they have got the virus if they cannot afford to take the time off work? If the choice is feeding three children by going to work or ignoring those uncomfortable symptoms, I suspect I know the decision that most of us would make.

The boroughs in London that have the highest rates are those with the worst housing, where there is a family in every room, where they share a bathroom with people they do not know. What do we do for those people to ensure that they are in a position to self-isolate? I understand that in New York the way they drove rates down was by providing people who did not have it with the money, the hotel room, the food—they even offered to walk their dogs!—to encourage them to self-isolate.

Rather than the siren calls against people who are doing their best, what we need to do as a Government and as a society is say to people, "Go and get the test. We will help you to have your time off work. We will help you to treat your symptoms, because we want to put an end to the virus." No help to them means increasing rates for all of us.

5.36 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD) [V]: Covid has created many additional challenges for our country and I want to touch on but a few. Women, particularly pregnant women and new mothers, are more likely to be in insecure jobs. The result is that women have been even more likely to see a loss of income. The Government have finally released guidance for pregnant women in the workplace. It took nine months of campaigning by groups such as Maternity Action to push the Government to release that guidance. I urge Ministers to look at adapting furlough schemes to allow employers to recover the full cost of the maternity suspension of women who are 28 weeks pregnant and beyond.

Many students in my constituency have written to me in the past couple of weeks. They are feeling isolated and let down by the lack of guidance that their universities have received from the Government. In addition to paying full tuition fees, they are also paying thousands of pounds for accommodation they cannot live in. I am calling on the Government for the rapid implementation of a review of this academic year, including recommendations for financial compensation.

I want to add my voice to the calls to prioritise teachers and school staff for vaccination. If the Government are serious about prioritising education, then the profession must come top of the priority list after the most clinically vulnerable and those on the frontline of healthcare. Protecting teachers and school staff from the effects of the virus must be a key part of the plan to get children back into schools. There would be no education for young people without the staff to deliver that education.

The same applies to the staff working in early years settings. The Government must urgently look at the support for early years providers. These remain open despite the fact that staff do not have access to testing and are not prioritised for vaccination. Widcombe Acorns, an outstanding pre-school in Bath, has raised concerns that settings are not able to make their own decisions as to whether they stay open. I urge the Government to confirm what they will do to support early years providers, both in terms of testing and access to vaccines, and the flexibility to make their own decisions on closures to protect their workforce.

5.39 pm

Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con): It was less than two weeks ago that I stood here and described the nightmarish data that was coming out of Milton Keynes University Hospital. The situation was grim then, and it is clear today that we are yet to turn the tide on the latest rise in cases. There have some dark days ahead. This lockdown will be different from the last. The nights are longer, the days are colder, and many people will have gone for months without seeing friends and family.

As ever, I think about the amazing staff at Milton Keynes University Hospital. Day in, day out, they go to work knowing that there is a killer virus in their workplace, worrying about not only their own safety but taking the virus home to their loved ones. Now they face the disgraceful prospect of encountering conspiracy theorists and anti-vaxxers protesting and shouting abuse as they enter their workplace. Their service to our country is invaluable. We are right to be proud of our NHS and all those who work so hard for us.

There are a very difficult few weeks ahead. Every day brings news that nobody wants to hear—news of more people falling ill, news of more people admitted to hospital and the most tragic news of all: news of people losing their lives. In these dark times, even as our nation grows weary of the restrictions and each day carries news that more families have lost a loved one, there is hope. We heard today from the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care that more than 2.3 million people across the United Kingdom have received the vaccination.

The speed at which the vaccine is being rolled out is amazing. It is an example of what we do best as a country. The hope offered by these vaccines is thanks to our public sector and our private sector pulling together. It is thanks to the knowledge and dedication of our world-class universities and the dynamism of our pharmaceutical industry. The hope is due to the expertise of our armed forces, the selflessness of our volunteers and the tireless dedication of health workers. We will make it through these dark days. Our victory over this pandemic will be yet another example of the strength and resolve of our nation and what we can achieve when we pull together.

5.42 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab) [V]: The pandemic has touched the life of every single person in this country to a greater or lesser extent, but for many, the impact has been devastating. We cannot get away from the inequalities that were already apparent in the UK but have been growing over the past 10 months. This Government have not tackled those inequalities head-on in the way that other nations have done.

Before focusing on that, I want to start on a positive note, by acknowledging the speed with which the Government are rolling out the vaccination programme; for once, there is no dithering. As co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for cycling and walking, I also pay tribute to the Government's speedy rolling out of funding and enabling regulation to allow councils to create safe space for cycling and walking.

I come back to the meat of my speech, on those who have missed out. The Government repeatedly reel off the billions of pounds and the millions of people who are being supported, but again and again they avoid addressing those who miss out and who are being supported in equivalent economies. There has been no decent uplift in sick pay, meaning that those on low pay cannot afford to be off work, so they risk infecting their colleagues. There has been no news about continuing the £20 uplift in universal credit—and by the way, with the £27,000 universal credit cap, west London's high housing costs mean that families here are left with almost nothing after housing costs are paid.

There is nothing for the many families whose adult members were working but have no recourse to public funds. Year 11 and year 13 children are looking to the future, but they are stressed out because they have been told only now about the summer exams—and even now, the details are not clear—when Wales made its decision in November and the Republic of Ireland last August. Too many children are still waiting for adequate IT access.

We have had no announcement about extending support to those excluded altogether from income schemes—they are still the excluded—and there is no sign of the long-awaited aviation strategy and support for aviation communities. Some 20,000 Hounslow borough residents work—or rather they did—in or around Heathrow, many in low-paid work. They cannot wait until aviation one day picks up to pre-covid levels, if it ever does. We need support and help from the Government now.

Before I finish, I want to address the issue of the anti-vaxxers' campaign among the black, Asian and minority ethnic community. I hope that the Government's extended communications strategy and the additional funding work to identify which communities are getting this anti-vax message and which outlets they read and watch, and to get the Government's messages to those outlets; it is about more than just translations. I hope that the Government are listening.

5.45 pm

James Daly (Bury North) (Con) [V]: May I put on the record my thanks to Will Blandamer, Lesley Jones, Jeff Schryer and the whole team in Bury for the roll-out, at high speed, of the vaccine? We are confident that the four priority groups will be vaccinated by February, and that is a great achievement. It is a true community effort, and they have the thanks of all of us in our community. Our excellent Vaccine Deployment Minister confirmed to me in a meeting yesterday that the Pfizer vaccine gives 91% protection after the first dose, and the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine gives 80% protection after the first dose but 100% protection against severe infection.

In the time that I have, I would like to talk about how we remove the restrictions that are blighting our businesses and impacting our daily lives. The hospitality sector has gone through hell during this pandemic, and we need to take all necessary steps to continue the economic support that is needed and to remove restrictions on that sector at the earliest opportunity.

The financial steps that we need to take include extending the business rates holiday for pubs to the financial year 2021-22, and extending the VAT cut beyond 31 March 2021 and expanding it to cover alcoholic drinks. We must never forget the thousands of pounds that hospitality sector businesses have spent creating covid-secure environments. In my area, there is virtually no evidence of widescale transmission of covid in those settings. With the vaccinations that I talked about being rolled out in February, we must look to reopen those facilities at the earliest opportunity, and certainly before May.

I also ask the Chancellor, as part of his considerations leading up to the Budget, to consider support for small businesses, which have to power our economic recovery. We have provided substantial support—over £260 billion—for our economy, but some businesses do not have the support they need. Small business people in my constituency who have been paid quite legally in dividends and fall under the threshold for the self-employment schemes need help. I urge the Government and the Chancellor to take every opportunity to provide further financial support to protect thousands of jobs, not only in the hospitality sector but in those small businesses that my constituents and many others throughout the country have spent their lives building up. They need our help now.

5.49 pm

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Con): It is an honour and a privilege to follow my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Daly). While I would have wished to give this speech last week during the recall, when we discussed going into lockdown, we are where we are, and I hope to touch on some of those points now.

Although I have not always been a supporter—though not necessarily a sceptic—of the Government measures regarding coronavirus, I was going to back the lockdown last week, mainly because there is no alternative when we look at the spread of the new variant. In my own borough, figures have more than doubled in a matter of weeks. I also speak to my twin brother, who is a nurse in a covid ward, and hear of the pressures that he has, day in, day out, just keeping people alive. Although it was with a heavy heart, and was certainly not something that I ever wanted to do, I went through that lobby, to ensure that the people of this country and of my borough are safe.

When we look at moving forward from where we are now, the vaccine is the light at the end of the tunnel. I echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg), in that we need to look at setting benchmarking thresholds for how we come out of this lockdown, whether that is the number of vaccines that have been delivered or certain groups having been vaccinated. We need a route out of lockdown, and a route to reopen our economy and our businesses.

Many businesses have struggled. We have spoken many times in this Chamber about the 3 million excluded. The Government have gone some way in trying to address that, with millions of pounds given to local authorities by way of discretionary grants. Unfortunately, some councils have had a very wide remit for where they give the grants to, and others have been much more narrow. In my borough, we are now on the third tranche of funding, and still those home-based businesses have been unable to receive the support that they drastically need.

With the support of my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North, we are hopeful that changes will be made in the imminent future so that businesses, families and individuals who have struggled for all these months will get the support that they need, and I echo his comments. The Chancellor has my thanks for everything that he has done, but we need to do a bit more—anything we can do to reopen businesses and the economy and, more importantly, to allow care home visits to resume in a meaningful way so that families can finally be reunited, hug, hold hands and kiss their loved ones. That, unfortunately, has been one of the biggest tragedies of this entire pandemic. Anything my hon. Friend on the Front Bench can advise with regard to that would be greatly appreciated.

5.52 pm

Claudia Webbe (Leicester East) (Ind) [V]: We now have the bare minimum of a national lockdown that should have happened weeks ago. The evidence was clear. The continuous delay and failure to follow the science and to take a zero-covid approach means that we now have more people with covid-19 in hospitals than at the peak in April 2020. Tragically, recent figures put us at well over 1,000 daily deaths due to coronavirus

in the UK. In comparison, South Korea has recorded fewer deaths from coronavirus throughout this entire pandemic. Indeed, in one day the UK has recorded more deaths than the total covid-19 fatalities in all of Taiwan, New Zealand, Thailand and Australia, despite those countries having a combined population of nearly twice that of the UK's.

This was not inevitable, but a devastating political and ideological choice. My city of Leicester has been under lockdown or enhanced restrictions for longer than any other area in the UK. No household has been allowed to visit another household since March 2020. That means no hugs. There are individuals and businesses in my constituency of Leicester East that have had no financial support since March 2020. They are on their knees. The Government must stop blaming the public and urgently look at the gaps and provide adequate support for everyone in our community, which they have so far repeatedly failed to do. The numbers are not going down in parts of my constituency because factories are open for non-essential garment manufacturing. Close the factories. Give people the means to stay safe.

At every stage of the crisis, there has been dithering and delay. Any common-sense actions by our Government have come far too late. Tragically, that will have cost an unimaginable number of lives over the past year. It is so infuriating to see the Government and, indeed, much of the media blame the public for the spike in cases. It was not the public who introduced a failed and confusing tier system. It was not the public who just weeks ago threatened schools with legal action for taking steps to protect their pupils and staff. It was not the public who promised a five-day Christmas free-for-all.

Unlike with previous lockdowns, this time the Government cannot waste the sacrifices of people in Leicester and across the UK. They must ensure that everyone has the means to isolate. Statutory sick pay must be increased to a living wage level and made available to all workers. Furlough must be fixed, so that no one receives less than the minimum wage. NHS and public service wages must be increased. The notion of cutting universal credit must be abandoned and, instead, it must be increased permanently.

The mortgage holiday, the eviction ban and support for renters must be further extended and strengthened. The 3 million excluded and left behind must be supported and given access to the business grant. The hospitality sector, including the wedding industry, must be properly supported. Undocumented migrants must be given status now. Student rents must be returned, and university tuition fees and debts cancelled.

The disastrous costly reliance on the private sector must be abandoned. The Government should not facilitate profit making from free school meals. It is wrong to profit from childhood hunger.

5.55 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): May I outline five concerns that affect my constituents? First, they are concerned that some people are not getting mail telling them to get their vaccination. In particular, that affects the elderly, who do not like having to use the internet; they want a telephone number. May we please have a telephone number, locally, for all of us, so that we can ring it to get the information about people who have not been called for a vaccination when they should have been?

Secondly, I am concerned that pre-schools and nurseries are still open. I do not quite get the logic of them being open and primary schools being closed. I have not seen really good evidence to support that.

Thirdly, I am concerned—as we all are in Beckenham—about the increasing number of children turning up at school claiming to be from key worker families. That is happening increasingly, and puts teachers at even more risk.

Fourthly, I am concerned about musicians—there are a lot of musicians in Beckenham—who have had a really hard time over the pandemic trying to get income, because they do not necessarily qualify for help. When they do get business and when we are allowed to travel, however, the rules debar them from easily travelling in and out of the country to make their living in Europe.

Fifthly, I am very concerned, as others are, about the future of the hospitality industry. Too many cafés and restaurants in my constituency will fail to reopen. When they were able to open before, I went to have some meals, and I thought that they were doing extremely well at social distancing. I have not seen any evidence that cafés and restaurants were causing an increase in infection. We have to open them as soon as possible. I understand that distancing reduces covid but, actually, we have to think this one through carefully. I gather from people who are the experts—not me—that cafés and restaurants are not great spreaders of this dreadful pandemic, so may we please open as soon as possible?

Those are my five concerns but, frankly, looking at other colleagues around the House, most of them are nodding, because they agree that those concerns affect them, too, in their constituency. I am done, thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

5.58 pm

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to be able to contribute to this debate. In doing so, I thank again everybody in North East Derbyshire for everything that they are doing. In the most difficult period of our lives, what our constituents have done, are doing and will continue to do is incredible. We will get through this together, and I thank them for everything.

Today, I want to focus on the last mile in front of us and a very vexing part of the public debate around that. It is hard to believe that only a year ago today the World Health Organisation confirmed the existence of a coronavirus in China. That year has felt like 10. The virus has turned our lives upside down repeatedly and yet, ragged, weary and older, we persist.

Even as the light draws nearer, with the vaccinations, we still have much work to do. Even with hundreds of thousands of jabs going in arms on a daily basis, suppression at this last stage remains vital. Yet every day, I am contacted by residents who remain unsure about the strategy that we are pursuing and who rightly challenge and question. They are absolutely right to do so.

Most accept the position once we discuss it. A small number remain unsure; they want to be supportive of the Government's actions, but they are buffeted by the continual suggestions—particularly on social media—that the virus is some kind of collective mirage. Given the siren voices on those media, I can see why the alternative view is so alluring. They suggest easy choices, benign realities and soft landings—that we are in a casedemic;

that the pandemic was over in the summer. It would be fantastic if that were true, yet it is not.

This tiny, unrepresentative group, basking in past glories or extended CVs, continues to argue against reality. For a time, I thought they were valuable voices of scepticism in the debate; then, that they were just wrong. Now, I am not sure I can accord them that benign intent.

Bob Stewart: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I entirely agree. It seems to me that someone does not need to go to medical school or law school or any other professional establishment to get a qualification these days; they can become a professor just by going on the internet.

Lee Rowley: I am grateful for that contribution from my hon. Friend. It highlights that fact that just because somebody has a certain number of letters after their name or a title in front of it does not necessarily mean that we should not apply the same element of scepticism to what they say, particularly when they are saying things that are not accurate. This small group of people operate in a grey space, suggesting that because something is not happening right now, it is impossible for it to happen and that it cannot possibly be the case that there may be catastrophic outcomes if we are not careful.

I should be clear: I do not seek to silence these people. They are free and should always be free to make their statements, whether they are correct or otherwise, but I seek to highlight that they are wrong. What they assert, they must justify, and when they cannot—as was the case when I spoke to one of them directly a few months ago about repeated assertions on the inaccuracy of the PCR tests—they should be treated with the disdain that they all treat us with by making these false assertions in the first place.

Our hospitals are full. Our death statistics are high. We can see the virus in our communities. On this last mile, please do not listen to these people. We will get there and hold on. Together, we can do this.

6.3 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I wholeheartedly agree with the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley). Careless talk costs lives. We need to be absolutely clear about the science and be behind it.

On a personal level, I do not care whether the Prime Minister did or did not take a seven-mile bike ride yesterday. What I do care about is the lack of clarity. Clarity ensures that people know what is legitimate and what is not. I say that particularly as a Member of Parliament for the Lake district and the Yorkshire dales. I have no problem with people taking short trips to exercise—I think that is what is intended in the advice. I do have a problem with people packing up their car and making 100-mile or 150-mile journeys to exercise in the Lakes, or indeed anywhere else, at this time.

I want to focus my remarks on the hospitality industry. Tourism and hospitality is the fourth biggest employer in the country and the biggest employer in Cumbria by some distance. Undoubtedly, it has been the worst hit industry in this country during the pandemic. In my constituency, we have seen a sixfold increase in unemployment. At one stage, more than 40% of the

[*Tim Farron*]

entire workforce in my constituency was on furlough, largely because of the reliance on that remarkably important industry.

I make some calls for what the Government should do. I have listened to Cumbria tourism businesses over the last few days. First, the Government were right to defer business rates; I ask them to defer business rates for a further year. They were right to cut VAT; I ask them to extend the VAT cut for a further year. They have been right to extend furlough, but even if we ease restrictions in hospitality and tourism after March, they need to consider the continuation of some form of wage support beyond that period. I say that because we have otherwise healthy businesses that will be at the forefront of leading the fightback in our economy once we begin to move out of this crisis period. If we do not back those businesses now, they will be in no state to be part of the fightback. It is the cash that is going to be the problem. It is great for businesses to have the furlough and therefore have staff wages largely covered, but if a third or a quarter of their overheads are not staff-related, even furlough will not save those businesses from going under in the end.

The cash grants that have been made available to businesses at this time are far lower than those given in the spring. We need equivalent levels of investment in cash flow and grant support for hospitality and tourism businesses to those that we had back in the spring. We also need to stop overlooking the 4,500 people in my constituency who would be counted among the excluded. Many are self-employed or running their own companies, and they are the backbone of any recovery; we need them if we are to get out of this mess after the virus is defeated.

6.5 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con) [V]: I think we have reached a stage in the life of these debates when it is difficult to think of anything original to say. Nevertheless, the residents of Southend West want their voices to be heard through their Member of Parliament. I am pleased to say that the vaccination of most of the vulnerable people in Southend is well under way, but will the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), assure me that Southend will be receiving enough vaccines to complete the inoculation of people who are most at risk as soon as possible? After all, we do have the greatest number of centenarians in the country. Will she also update us on the progress with authorising recently retired nurses and doctors to administer vaccinations?

The partnership approach between the police, Southend-on-Sea Borough Council and public health is working extremely well, and has minimised the spread of the virus. However, without clear rules about what people can and cannot do, the police are having to use their own judgment on grey areas, which leads to a breakdown in community confidence. It is also essential that the service on the c2c line is frequent enough that key workers are able to socially distance.

I have been contacted by a number of constituents who have not been eligible for any Government support throughout the pandemic. I urge the Government to

announce support for directors of limited companies who have been left with no income for almost a year. Business rates also need to be cut and made fairer to ensure that independent businesses are still around at the end of the pandemic. One of my constituents who was employed in human resources has been made redundant and does not qualify for universal credit or other benefits, so has had no income for over seven months. That cannot be right. With no signs of when pubs and restaurants will be able to reopen, we must make sure that hospitality businesses are given targeted support.

With the return to remote learning for most school pupils, it is vital that the most vulnerable students are supported. I have been contacted by a number of constituents expressing their concerns about the safety of nursery schools and other early year providers as coronavirus cases continue to rise. The summer exams have been cancelled, and schools, parents and students must have clarity about when and how grades will be assessed and awarded. We must also ensure that university students are not forgotten. Some students who are eligible for free school meals are now being provided with food parcels. Well, if the pictures of them that I have seen today are accurate, I ask myself: who was the fool who authorised this? It is essential that we keep our churches open.

I end with these thoughts: we all need things to look forward to and we have had that with the vaccinations; I now challenge the Government to come up with something else that we can all look forward to.

6.8 pm

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con) [V]: I refer to the declarations that I have made in relation to the Covid Recovery Group.

This country needs hope. It needs hope that is sure, certain and not far away, and it needs it first and foremost because of the scale of the disease in our hospitals, including here in Buckinghamshire, where the number of patients in hospital has now exceeded that in the first wave.

I pay tribute to the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), who raised the issue of the allegation of false PCR test results. That people are saying such things is a real problem that is stoking conspiracy theories now. One only needs to listen to hospital doctors to know that they do not need PCR tests today to know that there is a serious respiratory disease epidemic. People have pneumonia needing oxygen. They have characteristic X-rays, characteristic blood test results and characteristic symptoms. Real doctors and real patients know that this is a real epidemic, and no one should say otherwise.

We need hope because too many people are going without medical care because coronavirus rates are too high. Wrongly, they are not presenting themselves because they fear putting a burden on the NHS. I would say to them: please do present. We need hope because too many businesses are suffering. I do not know what a lockdown enthusiast says to someone who says, as someone said to me, that they have lost their livelihood—their life's work—towards the end of their working life, and that their household of six people know nine people who have committed suicide. What do you say to such a person? We need to move beyond anecdotes to real data.

That is why I and my colleagues have been calling for proper cost-benefit analysis throughout this pandemic. We cannot afford to focus on any one aspect of this crisis.

To bring hope, the Government need to stop fear. I think that the fearful are already terrified. We need other methods to reach those who have not been complying—yes, enforcement, but good-quality enforcement, and that requires good law. The goal must be to get to a point where there are no more restrictions—where we have returned to a free life.

That is why this vaccination programme is so important. I am delighted that the Government have established centres in Wycombe, as has been announced today. We all need to support that vaccination programme. We all need to comply with the rules, whether we like them or not, in order to look after one another. The Government have told us that 88% of the fatalities from coronavirus can be dealt with by reaching the top four JCVI groups. That is what the Government must now focus on, and, having delivered it, it is imperative that they set out a clear plan—to bring hope by setting us free.

6.11 pm

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con) [V]: For 11 months now, we have been gripped in the jaws of the covid-19 health pandemic. It has brought hardship on businesses and livelihoods, upended our very freedoms and liberties, and unfortunately, for too many families, brought heartbreak and sorrow at the loss of a loved one.

The area I want to focus on is the impact that covid-19, and with it, the necessary measures for lockdown that the Government have introduced to suppress the virus, has had on education—specifically, the toll it has taken on university students. Many in this House will have experienced the excitement, anticipation and nerves of those first few days at university, meeting new people, settling into student digs, attending the first lecture—and yes, out of the gaze of mum and dad, enjoying a drink or two more than perhaps one should. But for thousands of students this year and last, that experience has been denied them; they are experiencing a university education and lifestyle through a screen back at the family home as the covid-19 virus continues to swirl around us.

University staff and lecturers have gone above and beyond to support students and ensure that they can still receive the education they signed up for. However, this is not comparable to the experience students should be getting. It is not offering students access to the resources and facilities that cohorts before them could utilise. We therefore have to ask: is this year really worth over £9,000 for the educational and experience students are getting? Meanwhile, is it right that when we have asked students to do the right thing and stay at home away from university, they are still being charged for rent at their university halls of residence?

This next generation are going to be the pioneers in industries and endeavours that none of us can even imagine right now. In the post-covid-19 world, we are going to need new talent to drive our green industrial revolution, to chart our course around the world as global Britain, to end up educating and training the generation that comes after them—and yes, to be the scientists of the future who will discover new vaccines for diseases and viruses that we do not know of yet.

So far these students have had a raw deal through no fault of their own, and we should do something now to help them out. We can start by reducing their university fees for the covid-19 period and not asking them to pay rent on university accommodation that they are being asked not to stay in. Those might seem like small gestures, but they matter. We need to be doing all we can to support our young people through this challenging time. They face an uncertain jobs market and an economy battered by recent events, so let us reduce some of the burden now. University staff are playing their part, with the provision of education; now, as a Government, we can do our bit and relieve the financial pressures that our students are facing.

6.14 pm

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow my friend and Sussex colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart). Like her, I wish to speak for one group whose plight has been systematically under-represented in this House from the start of the covid pandemic.

A constituent, Bella, who is a student at the University of Bristol, wrote to me eloquently:

“I’m the first person to go to university in my family. I have spent my whole life looking forward to it and worked incredibly hard to earn my place. Online learning is not the same as the teaching that took place before. Student life has been halted. There are no societies, limited access to libraries, minimal mental health support and—further still—we are now not even able to return to our accommodation at the beginning of the second term. To say I’m disappointed would be an understatement. Yet, we must pay the same in fees.”

This Government have a proud tradition of broadening access to and driving opportunity through higher education. We are on the side of the strivers and for the individual, whose aspirations we should always support against the vested interests and the status quo.

For students such as my constituent Bella, and many hundreds of thousands like her, I would like to see the Government do three things. First, they should support undergraduates to be able to go back to college now and stay back, with a structured return, underpinned by the triple security of a rigorous and robust testing regime, compliance with social distancing and the new restrictions on international arrivals.

Secondly, I would like the Government to extend the summer term by the same number of weeks that are forgone now, in order to provide additional teaching, exam or even simply social time, procured via an agreement with the leadership of Universities UK in return for Government support for universities to retain their full tuition fees for the current year.

Finally, although it is very much subordinate to getting universities open again, I would like the Government to look once more at the possibility of a financial support package for students, who as consumers are currently getting a very poor deal.

6.17 pm

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con) [V]: I am keen that this period of national restrictions is as brief as possible, particularly so that young people can return to their education. In the main, the guidance is being followed and I thank my North Devon constituents,

[Selaine Saxby]

who have consistently followed it and ensured that our cases continue to remain below the national average. However, I want to ensure that the guidance at this critical time really does tackle the spread of the new variant.

I very much hope that the Minister may be able to detail where transmission is currently taking place, because although many residents who live near beauty spots are concerned about visitors, my understanding remains that the risk of transmission outside remains low. Our focus in respect of any tightening of restrictions should be on where transmission is currently most prevalent.

While we are at level 5 of the covid alert system, we all need to do everything we can to reduce pressure on the NHS, not only by following the guidance to reduce covid transmission, but by reducing other activities that could put further pressures on our treasured health service. As soon as this alert level 5 passes—and it will—we must be ready to roll back the restrictions as rapidly as possible. The damage done through lockdown goes far beyond those who contract covid directly.

I wish to take this opportunity to highlight the work of the National Bereavement Partnership, which was set up from my constituency in the first lockdown and now offers national freephone support, seven days a week, from 7 am to 10 pm. To date, the partnership has provided more than 3,000 hours of helpline services. Yesterday, its founder, the remarkable Michaela Willis, highlighted to me the living losses that the partnership deals with each day. Covid-19 does not come alone. Bereavement does not come alone. Ambiguous losses that affect everyday functioning are compounding deaths and/or bring their own grief journey—everything from loss of income, loss of jobs, loss of way of life, loss of hopes and dreams and loss of life as people know it, to homelessness and financial deprivation.

I wish to take this chance to say thank you to Michaela and her team. I very much hope that they will be able to offer many others help through the dark hours that the steadily rising death toll no doubt creates, and that we can all look to a brighter, less restrictive future thanks to the excellent vaccination programme that we have begun to roll out.

6.19 pm

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con) [V]: Warrington South is a case study in how quickly the new strain of coronavirus can spread. At the end of November, we were one of a handful of local areas that came out of the national lockdown in a lower tier than the one in which we went in. The town delivered a massive effort to bring infections down during the second wave, emerging at about 150 cases per 100,000 of the population. The situation today looks very different.

At the beginning of October, I stood in the House and discussed the challenges that Warrington Hospital was facing. It looked as if a second wave was emerging. I talked about the tremendous efforts of doctors and nurses who were fighting to save lives in the ICU. Today, at the beginning of January, covid cases are at 780 per 100,000 of the population—up 50% on the figure a week ago. In some areas of the borough, levels exceed 1,450 cases per 100,000 of the population.

For Warrington, this is our third wave, and the most testing of times. Today, sadly, Warrington Hospital has exceeded the number of inpatients from the peaks in both April and October. Twenty-five people are in ICU, exceeding the surge capacity, and placing extreme strains on our local NHS. That snapshot shows how serious the new strain is and why we all need to play our part in defeating the virus and supporting our local hospital.

This week, Warrington launched its community testing hubs to identify asymptomatic cases, particularly for key workers and those who cannot work from home. I pay particular tribute to the team that pulled that together so quickly at Grappenhall cricket club and the Halliwell Jones stadium under the director of public health, Thara Raj. Yesterday, I saw for myself the efficient service, with people getting results in around 30 minutes.

Alongside that effort, work is being done by GPs, community carers and volunteers to establish a vaccination programme in rapid time. Figures that I have received today from the clinical commissioning group show that about 5,000 residents across Warrington have been vaccinated. Importantly, 80% of patient-facing NHS staff have received their first dose—that is just short of 4,000 people. In total, 9,000 people in Warrington have been vaccinated. My ask of the Minister is to ensure that vaccination supplies continue, because we would like a 24-hour drive-through, with queues, so that we can get life back to normal as soon as we can.

Finally, may I make one more request? The efforts of my colleagues over the past few months to encourage supermarkets to return business rates has begun to pay off. I urge Ministers to think carefully about how they use that funding, particularly to support small businesses that have not received anything so far, freelancers and directors of small limited companies. This is an incredibly challenging time. Now we must all play our part.

6.22 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con) [V]: It is a pleasure to speak in today's important debate and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter).

Covid-19 has affected each and every part of our lives. We were all affected by the national restrictions in November, and now we are all living under the latest lockdown. There are a few of points that I would like to touch on, including, first, enforcement, particularly in the light of the lockdown announced by the Prime Minister last week. Given the new strain of the virus, the lockdown is necessary—that is why I voted for it—but all of us here in Westminster should not underestimate how weary the public are. We have all had nearly a year of disruption; a year of uncertainty for small businesses; a year of our young people not being able to socialise; and a year of being unable to give our closest friends and family a simple hug. Across Keighley and Ilkley, people tell me that they are sometimes confused by the rules, particularly the fact that they change so often, sometimes at short notice.

People across the country, even in lockdown, live busy lives. The truth is that, although we would love them to do so, they are not sitting watching Parliamentlive.tv at home or checking the gov.uk website every day; they are getting on with their lives. So, in my view, in enforcing

the lockdown restrictions, the police should use the four Es: engage, explain, encourage, then enforce as the last resort.

Secondly, I want to talk about support for businesses and people. The Chancellor and the whole Treasury team have done an amazing job. There are, however, small but major issues for businesses accessing support, particularly business support grants and discretionary grants that are being provided by the Government but distributed by local councils. Dozens of my local businesses have contacted me to say that they have yet to receive payments of grants from the local authority, Bradford Council. Our councils have a duty to make sure that this money is distributed as quickly as possible, and I urge them to do that. Where that is not happening, will the Government look at providing support directly to businesses themselves?

Finally, I want to touch on education. I would like to see our key workers, teachers and those providing support in our nurseries fall within the next category for the vaccine roll-out. I know that Ministers are looking at that, and I urge them to consider those people for the next batch. We are nearly there; we are nearly at the end of the tunnel and we have made a fantastic start so far with the vaccine roll-out.

6.26 pm

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con) [V]: It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore). First, I would like to talk about vaccines. I welcome what we set out yesterday in the vaccine delivery panel, and I congratulate the Secretary of State and the vaccines Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), on all that they have done on that. I particularly welcome the dashboard. As a data geek, I have been refreshing it today during this debate and I have worked out that 165,844 more doses were added to it today. That is a rate of over 1 million a week, which is great, but it is not enough, as we know.

I have also had the opportunity to see how the vaccine roll-out is going in my constituency. On Friday, I went to the Loomer Road surgery in Chesterton and saw the incredibly slick operation there. They were injecting Pfizer that day; this week, they are out doing AstraZeneca in the care homes. The overall response on the vaccine programme has been excellent throughout Staffordshire, but we clearly have the capacity to deliver more vaccines than we are currently getting. That is the point I would like to make to the Minister: we need more supply. We need to up the manufacturing capabilities as soon as we can. I am looking forward to speaking to both AstraZeneca and the vaccines Minister tomorrow at the Science and Technology Committee, when I will be asking exactly that: how can we get the supply up more quickly?

In the Minister's opening speech, he highlighted the great British scientists who have contributed to our fight against covid and the work of the vaccine taskforce. As a member of the Science and Technology Committee, I have been privileged to interview and take evidence from all these people throughout the pandemic. On Friday, we published our first report on the use of scientific advice by the Government; it was rather overshadowed

by the disgraceful scenes in Washington. I would like to thank the Committee and the Clerks and to highlight the fact that the Government have always been serious about taking and following advice. There was an initial lack of transparency around SAGE, which has been rectified, and this needs to be continued for other areas. We need the same for other measures. We need more transparency about the other effects of the things we are taking, and data fragmentation must improve. Perhaps we could look at what Israel has been able to achieve on that in the last few weeks.

Finally, I would like to talk a bit about the human cost of the pandemic. Newcastle-under-Lyme borough has now sadly passed 250 deaths, and I have heard repeatedly from the Royal Stoke University Hospital about how much pressure it is under. The piece that has left the biggest mark on me in recent weeks was published on UnHerd by an anonymous junior doctor on 6 January. It brought home the awfulness of people's suffering. I shall quote from it briefly:

"The most distressing part of their struggle is the air hunger. You can spot these patients easily, as they grasp the masks to their faces with both hands and gasp visibly for air."

Anybody who doubts the seriousness of what we are going through or who doubts how hard our hospitals are having to work to manage the pandemic should read that piece. I thank the anonymous junior doctor for writing it, and I thank them for all that they and their colleagues are doing for all of us.

6.29 pm

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): Covid has hammered the towns and villages of North West Durham, in terms of deaths—so many people have gone too soon—and of life-changing issues such as permanent lung scarring. Additionally, the measures necessary to control the virus have had a huge impact locally—on local businesses, which are really suffering, on local job losses and on the broader local economy. That has particularly been the case in our hospitality sector, our local gyms and our personal care sector. It is estimated that across the country these restrictions are costing the UK about £1 billion a day.

As the Minister knows, vaccines are our way out, and one in every 250 or so people vaccinated is a life saved; that means that for around 250,000 vaccines a day going out, we are saving 1,000 lives a day. The Public Accounts Committee yesterday questioned the chair of the vaccine taskforce, and she made it clear that we were several months ahead of other countries in our roll-out plans.

I hugely praise the efforts of my local NHS in North West Durham. I recently visited Shotley Bridge Hospital and Weardale Community Hospital and have regular calls with our CCG and NHS trust. All the staff are at the moment working on an enormous task and achieving at putting the north-east at the forefront of the vaccine programme. We seem to be getting communities really onside, and people are getting vaccinated. I encourage everybody who is eligible to take that up as quickly as possible.

I quickly want to ask the Minister one thing. It is great news about the dashboard—I have been on it myself today—but when will we see the regional and local breakdowns, because that will help give people even more confidence that the vaccines are coming to them?

[Mr Richard Holden]

Finally, we are all desperate for an end to lockdown and for a return to normality so that our businesses can thrive once more, and I urge the Minister to ensure that the restrictions are lifted at the earliest safe opportunity for our constituents.

6.31 pm

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con) [V]: I would like to make three brief points.

First, vaccination is undoubtedly a significant and great success story, and I thank all involved nationally and on the Island. On the Island we have vaccinated well over 10,000—probably about 12,000—people so far, so it is under way. Four sites are vaccinating at the moment: Carisbrooke, the Bay practice, Westridge, and doctors and nurses working out of the West Wight sports and community centre in Freshwater, as well as the hospital. I do however have a slight concern, on which I would be grateful to get a direct answer from the Minister—I have written to the Secretary of State and to the vaccine Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi). The vaccine hub at the Riverside centre in Newport is expected to be ready on 15 January; earlier today in a question I accidentally said 15 July; clearly, I meant 15 January, so it will be ready in about three days. We may not, however, receive the vaccines for it and the sign-off for at least 10 days, and potentially more, afterwards. We are therefore potentially missing out on vaccinating about 500 people per day, and over 10 days that is 5,000 people who could have had a first jab. With our rise in infection on the Island, our demographic profile, and our isolation and dependency on ferries and potentially helicopters, I am concerned that we are not high enough on the vaccine supply list—not for the four primary care networks, but for our vaccine centre. As I say, I have written to the Secretary of State about this, but it would be great to get an answer.

Secondly, may we have a medium-term outline of what lies ahead? Businesses need clarity; people, especially in the hospitality sector on the Island and the festival sector need to be able to plan and to know if they can reopen in April or May or later in the summer.

We know that, sadly, 50% of deaths are among the over-80s, and 88%, nearly 90%, of deaths are in the top four at-risk categories. If those good folks are all vaccinated on time, taking into account the three-week period afterwards that it takes for the vaccine to become live, by early March we should be clear of nearly 90% of deaths. That then raises the question of whether we will be coming out of lockdown at that point, or will the Government then say it is not about mortality but about prevalence of covid? We need clarity and a decision on this as soon as possible.

Finally, and related to that, the Isle of Wight is Britain's festival island, and the Government need to think about support for festivals because they are planning already; their decisions are being made in the next few weeks and help for that sector would be gratefully received.

6.34 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): We have had another well-subscribed debate, and Members' contributions have been short as a result but no less

effective for it. On the Opposition Benches, we have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon), who expressed concern that the current lockdown rules are inadequate and that the Government's response is to blame the public for non-compliance. My hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley) talked about the heroes who have kept this country going, and I join him in paying tribute to them. He said that they are the "very best of humanity" but are often among the lowest paid.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Ms Brown) gave a typically passionate speech. She described NHS staff as exhausted, stressed and traumatised, and she asked the right question: if the Nightingales are reopening, how can they be staffed when NHS staff are already at breaking point? She was outraged, as many of us are, at the paltry offering that our nation's children have been told is enough to feed them for a week. My hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) paid tribute to the work of the Welsh Assembly and made the fair point that, when it has made decisions to lock down, financial support from Westminster has not always followed automatically.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) expressed regret that the Government did not formally review their actions after the first wave, because if they had, mistakes might not have been repeated. My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) was, as always, a powerful advocate for her city, and she spoke about how businesses and individuals have suffered during the last year. My hon. Friends the Members for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher) and for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) drew attention to the widening health inequalities in the past decade that have now been exacerbated by the pandemic. My hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) spoke about the patchiness of vaccine supply in his constituency. As his neighbour, I recognise those concerns, as many Members do, and we hope to see great progress on that in the coming weeks.

Finally, in a powerful speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) reminded us that the link between covid cases and poverty is a stark one. She made a strong case for why more support is needed to enable people to self-isolate. In fact, just about every single Opposition Member raised that in one way or another. We have been making this case since the start of the pandemic, so why has it not happened?

We are in the darkest hour yet, but we still see the same failings again and again that have led us to this place. More people have been infected this year already than in the whole of October, when, let us not forget, things got so bad that we had to have another lockdown. Worse still, more people have died this month already than died in July, August and September put together. Every death is a tragedy. Every death leaves behind a grieving family, and while not every death is avoidable, not every one was inevitable.

The Government follow the same pattern every time, waiting until the last possible moment—until a decision becomes unavoidable. It is an ongoing cycle of bluster and denial, losing valuable time through delaying the inevitable and then running to catch up but never quite getting there. We can trace that pattern right back to

even before the start of the pandemic, when warnings about preparations were ignored and the Prime Minister missed five Cobra meetings when our initial response to this threat was drawn up.

The Government have repeatedly been too slow to act. They were too slow to lock down the first time, and the second and the third. Ignoring the scientific advice from SAGE on a circuit breaker lockdown for six weeks was unforgivable. The Government certainly were not following the science then, nor were they when they said they would not change the Christmas relaxation rules because it was too late to do so, only to then do it three days later. They then told teachers, parents and children that it was safe to return to school one day, only to close them the next.

The Government ignored the World Health Organisation's advice to test, test, test and stopped contact tracing altogether in March. As my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Claudia Webbe) set out, the Government's failings in social care are many, the most serious of which was allowing patients to be discharged into care homes without testing them for covid. We also had people being sent hundreds of miles just to get a covid test, all the while people were still coming into the UK without any checks at all. That still is not going to be corrected until the end of this week. The promise of all test results being returned within 24 hours has never materialised. Even now, the vast majority of tests take far longer than that to return.

They also delayed the roll-out of routine testing for care home staff but failed to anticipate the increase in testing capacity that would be needed when people returned to schools and workplaces, and they missed thousands of new cases because the spreadsheet was full. They set up a covid hotline that missed thousands of calls because of a failure to anticipate demand, again. On contact tracing, they developed the famous app and then could not get it to work. It was scrapped. They started again and finally delivered it four months' late. Then, when it arrived, a notification to self-isolate from it did not count for claiming the self-isolation payment.

Worst of all, they handed massive sums of money to private companies with no record of contact tracing to deal with test and trace, repeatedly ignoring the evidence that locally led teams consistently delivered better results. The consequences of that were that thousands of people every day were not contacted quickly enough or were not contacted at all, meaning they continued to unwittingly spread the virus. They also did not require those private testing companies to report their results back to local public health bodies, meaning that opportunities for early action on local outbreaks were missed.

On PPE, where do we start? Stockpiles were allowed to run down. The Government allowed desperately needed PPE to be exported abroad, while our own health and social care staff were having to scabble around or rely on homemade items. They signed £10 billion-worth of contracts on covid procurement without following the usual rules, including handing multimillion pound contracts to companies with no record of PPE production, some of whom supplied PPE that did not meet the required standards or, worse still, did not provide anything at all.

As we have said, they failed and are still failing to support people to self-isolate, bringing in a scheme of support that only one in eight people qualified for, with the unsurprising consequence that many people cannot

afford to self-isolate. This is one of the first things we brought up at the start of the pandemic almost a year ago and it is unbelievable that it has still not been resolved.

Finally, the Government introduced a tier system that did not work and then another tier system that experts told them from the start would not work, so they had to introduce yet another tier system that did not work before finally creating extra tiers to the tier system that also did not work. They have over-promised and under-delivered every step of the way. There is a tragic failure to learn from mistakes. That must not be allowed to happen with the roll-out of the vaccine. It is, after all, our only way out of the situation.

It is, of course, a source of great national pride that we were the first country to approve a vaccine for distribution and that our own scientists were integral to the development of the second vaccine that was approved. So it would be a huge failing if we then did not become the first country to mass vaccinate our population. For the families forced to part, for the businesses facing bankruptcy and for the NHS staff exhausted by the relentless pressure that the virus has created, we all want the quickest possible route out of this.

The vaccines Minister said yesterday that the limiting factor to the vaccine roll-out at the moment is the volume of vaccines available, but has provided little detail on future supply. Where has it gone? AstraZeneca promised 30 million doses by September. That went down to 4 million by the end of year and clearly much less has actually been delivered on the ground. All the best laid plans will not matter if the supply is not there, so I hope the Minister can set out a detailed schedule of how many doses have been received to date, how many are expected each week and what the weekly projections are for delivery moving forward. Once we have got that sorted, let us go for 24-hour delivery. I can assure the House that there is an appetite for that.

On the vaccination of NHS staff, the latest estimate is that there are now some 46,000 staff off ill with covid, so it is vital that all NHS staff receive their first dose as soon as possible. Will the Minister commit today not just to delivering them as soon as possible, but to ensuring that they all get their vaccines within the next two weeks? We very much welcome the vaccines data that will be published each day from Thursday, but will she also commit to publishing the daily total of health and social care staff vaccinated so we can see progress there, too. We absolutely need the NHS to be protected. In that regard, one way to relieve pressure is to ensure that discharges into the social care sector are managed. Can the Minister update us on when the 500 covid-secure care homes will finally be on stream?

I just want to say a few words on the current lockdown. As we have heard, there has been much debate, both in here and in the media, about whether the current measures in place are sufficient. Once again, we hear at second hand from media briefings that Ministers are considering introducing new measures. Can the Minister update us in here, today, on whether any further measures will be introduced? Advice in December called for the Government to reconsider the 1 metre-plus rule, and we hear that SAGE has urged the Prime Minister to go further and increase 2 metres to 3 metres. We cannot be too late on that as well, so can the Government set out today what their position is on the social distancing rules and whether they need to change?

[Justin Madders]

We know that the Government have also been advised to reinforce the importance of face coverings, including in settings where they are not currently mandated, such as workplaces and outdoor spaces. There was a two-month delay in advice on face coverings moving from just being guidance to becoming law. We cannot wait another two months for a change again if that is needed.

We all know why we need to look at extra measures, but to reinforce just how important that is, I want to conclude with a message that I received this morning from a constituent, who is an ICU nurse. She told me:

“I work full time plus extra, as we’re so, so busy. It’s horrendous. I am exhausted. I am still awake after a night shift, as I can’t switch off. I had four patients last night, I should only have had two. Then on my days off, I’m having to home-school as my husband, who is a store manager, is having to go to work and do click and collect. He says there are huge queues. It’s an absolute joke. This is not a proper lockdown.”

We need to listen to her. Our own eyes should tell us that this lockdown is not as strict as the first one, yet we have a more transmissible variant of the virus in circulation. Let us not delay again making the difficult but necessary decisions. Let us not put more pressure on an NHS already at breaking point. Let us not make those same mistakes again.

6.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jo Churchill): I start by echoing the remarks of the Minister for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), and by reflecting on my gratitude. As I have sat and listened to the speeches today, what I have heard is the gratitude of the whole House to all those who work on the frontline with such determination. As the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) said, there are people throughout the health and social care system going above and beyond every single day, and for that we are truly, truly grateful. Wherever they work, we have rightly congratulated them—whether it is those working on rolling out the vaccines, which includes the mother of my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg), or those who have come forward to volunteer to add to our effort.

I also thank those diverse and important elements of our healthcare system that very often do not get our thanks, but are the glue that sticks all the different parts of the system together. I am talking about the community health teams, who are tired. They have been working hard on the frontline, going into people’s homes, working in primary care, ensuring that, when people are discharged, they are looked after and cared for. Then there are the practice nurses, who are valiantly vaccinating every single day, and our allied health professionals—the physios, the speech and language therapists and the health visitors. Healthcare is still standing up while this pandemic rages, and those individuals are having to work with this virus in order to keep our services going. My hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) said that people should still please go to their health provider if they have something that they are worried about, and they will still help.

Andrew Griffith: My hon. Friend is making exactly the right point in thanking our dedicated health care professionals who, both in the length and the breadth of

their contribution, have been very significant. I went to the Pulborough Medical Group late last week to see one of the first vaccine roll-outs in my constituency, and I saw how complex it is, how dedicated the staff are and how fundamental teamwork is to dealing with every aspect of what is quite a complex vaccination process. There are other GP surgeries in my constituency that I would also love to see avail themselves of the vaccine, but would the Minister join me in thanking them and the many others across the United Kingdom?

Jo Churchill: I would be happy to join in my hon. Friend’s remarks. For me, when I visited one of the surgeries in Woolpit in my constituency, it was also the gratitude of those older members of our society who were being vaccinated. As one nursing member of staff said to me, “It’s just the gratitude of people”. They have heard more thank-yous in 10 months than they have across their careers before.

I think people are seeing this as a light at the end of the tunnel, as many speakers have said, but I also think we must be careful. While we are rolling out the vaccine, the way we can thank those right across the health service is to stick to the rules and to make sure that transmission between people is as minimal as possible and that we stay home. That is the way we can help them, because even when people have been vaccinated, there is a period of some three weeks before it starts to ensure that that individual is protected. There was a tweet by the Archbishop of Canterbury today who said that we wear a mask and keep our distance to protect our neighbour. We do all these things to protect others, making sure that through the course of this pandemic we follow the instructions. I do not feel they are confusing—stay at home, go out for one piece of exercise a day. It is pretty clear, and that is how we can help our health service, which is finding things tough at the moment.

Bob Stewart: I thank the Minister for allowing me to intervene. Could I ask the Minister to take away the fact that so many elderly people are really concerned about when they are going to get their vaccination? I have had three people in their 90s who have not been contacted, and this is about the lack of contact and the lack of information. The only way, or the best way, to deal with people of that age is not via the internet, but to have a local telephone number that people—the family perhaps, or the person themselves—can telephone. Can I ask the Minister to take that point away and try to set up something like that, because it would be so helpful and be good for morale among the elderly?

Jo Churchill: I thank my hon. Friend, and I would say a couple of things. Of course I will take that away and mention it to the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi). I would also reiterate the Minister for Health’s comment to my hon. Friend during his opening speech that if at first we do not succeed, we will try, try and try again. It is really important that people feel secure, and that it is not just one hit. If someone has missed their appointment—there may be valid reasons why people cannot get there—we will keep trying over and over again to ensure that as many people can receive the vaccination in as swift a time as possible, because ultimately that is how we will be safe.

Many people mentioned how brilliant pharmacists and their teams have been. We are starting to roll out the vaccine to community pharmacists through the pharmacy network over the course of this week, and building up next week. Many people also mentioned supply. This is a process of driving more and more capacity into the system to make sure that as we build a system—from the mass vaccination sites, in one of which the mum of my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove is working, cascading down through our communities and into more rural sites—those in care homes can get vaccinated without having to leave their care home. This is about making sure we are using GPs and pharmacists across our network, and mobilising the armed forces, who, as we heard in this place earlier today, have been absolutely at the forefront of making sure we get kit such as PPE to the right place, and have been out there helping with testing and helping with the vaccine roll-out. This has been a national effort and a team effort.

Siobhain McDonagh: Could the Minister comment on the supply of something fundamental: oxygen? I wrote to the Secretary of State on Saturday about supplies of oxygen to Epsom and St Helier trust, which had a specific problem, but it is not solely Epsom and St Helier—in London, a number of intensive care units are under great pressure and are worried about running out of oxygen.

Jo Churchill: I refer the hon. Lady to the in-depth answer on exactly that point that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State gave during Health and Social Care questions this morning, when he said that there is no national shortage of oxygen in the system. He explicitly outlined the challenges and what is being done to mitigate them.

Pharmacists are being brought online, as are many other parts of our system, including all the staff working hard behind the scenes to keep vital services going and to keep people safe. I reiterate that all front-facing health and social care staff in category 2 can access vaccines, including all dentists and their teams; I think nurses and optometrists were the other professions mentioned during the course of the debate.

We are entering a critical period in our fight against this virus. As my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt) said, there are challenging days ahead—we are not there yet. We are dealing with a new, more transmissible variant of this virus that risks overwhelming our NHS, so we had to put in place these tough but vital rules to slow the spread of the virus. I know how hard these rules have been, not only for those we are asking to follow them but for most of us—it goes to our very core. We did not come into politics to stop people doing things.

Mr Holden: I re-emphasise the Minister's point: none of us came into politics to put these rules in place. Can she please ensure that the rules are relaxed as soon as is practically possible and as soon as it is safe for our constituents?

Jo Churchill: I feel safe in saying that that is the ultimate wish of everybody who is involved in fighting this virus. As the hon. Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) said, most of us want a hug. We have been here long enough. The rules mean missing out on moments with loved ones and businesses having to shutter their doors once again. I am sure we have all had conversations with those businesses. Members from across the House spoke of the Chancellor's unprecedented support, which he outlined again in this place yesterday. He will have been listening to my hon. Friends the Members for Bury North (James Daly) and for Bury South (Christian Wakeford) and others who made that strong case for hospitality and the self-employed.

However, we have to keep going. Our response is improving every day. We are expanding our test capacity. We have distributed massive amounts of PPE—6.7 billion items—to the system, 70% of which was made in this country, so I do not recognise the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston's dire PPE forecast. It has turned, and we now have everybody on the frontline protected as they need to be. We are making the most of scientific advances, such as the two new treatments that passed rigorous clinical trials last week. I will not attempt the names like my hon. Friend the Minister for Health did; they appear to be tongue-twisters. As we fight this virus, we will support those impacted by the measures through our furlough scheme and support for the self-employed.

As well as support in the short term, we now have a way out in the long term thanks to the vaccines that we are rolling out: the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, which we were the first country in the world to clinically authorise; the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine, developed right here in the UK; and the Moderna vaccine, authorised on Friday, which we can soon add to our growing arsenal of vaccines. We now have a plan to get them far and wide, and I recommend to anybody who has not read the vaccine delivery strategy outlined yesterday that they do so. To date, we have vaccinated more than 2.4 million of the most vulnerable people, and 412,000 have had their second vaccine. That is amazing. From north, south, east and west, we have heard people praise this, and we are going from strength to strength. The work set out in the vaccine strategy will help us to return to normal life.

Today's debate has been engaging, and I thank everybody who has taken part. We have a difficult few weeks ahead as we enter this final stage of our response. We are called upon to sacrifice some of the things that we love to get this virus under control, but as we do so we can take comfort from the fact that help is on the way. The incredible advances will see us through. We will get through this together.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered covid-19.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

INSOLVENCY

That the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Extension of the Relevant Period) (No. 2) Regulations 2020 (S.I., 2020, No. 1483), dated 8 December 2020, a copy of which was laid before this House on 9 December, be approved.—*(Michael Tomlinson.)*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

TAX CREDITS

That the draft Tax Credits Reviews and Appeals (Amendment) Order 2020, which was laid before this House on 15 October, be approved.—*(Michael Tomlinson.)*

Question agreed to.

SITTINGS IN WESTMINSTER HALL (SUSPENSION) (NO.2)

Motion made,

That, notwithstanding Standing Order No. 10 (Sittings in Westminster Hall) and the Order of the House on 23 September 2020, there shall be no sittings in Westminster Hall with effect from Wednesday 13 January until the House otherwise orders.—*(Michael Tomlinson.)*

Hon. Members: Object!

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I have to tell the House that Mr Speaker has selected the manuscript amendment to the motion in the name of the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope). Copies of that manuscript amendment are available in the Vote Office and electronically. Under the practice of the House under current arrangements, a selected amendment to a motion that cannot be proceeded with after the moment of interruption constitutes an objection, so the motion cannot be taken.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE FIXED-TERM PARLIAMENTS ACT

Motion made,

That, notwithstanding the Resolution of the House of 10 November 2020, it be an instruction to the Joint Committee on the Fixed-term Parliaments Act that it should report by Wednesday 31 March 2021.—*(Michael Tomlinson.)*

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (PRIVATE MEMBERS' BILLS) (NO. 9) MOTION

Ordered,

That the Order of the House of 16 January 2020 (Business of the House (Private Members' Bills)), as amended by the Orders of the House of 25 March, 22 April, 12 May, 10 June, 1 July, 3 November and 30 December 2020, is further amended as follows:

leave out "15 January 2021, 22 January 2021, 29 January 2021, 5 February 2021, 26 February 2021, 5 March 2021, 12 March 2021 and 26 March 2021".—*(Michael Tomlinson.)*

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Object!

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): There is no need for the hon. Gentleman to object. As I explained with motion 5, Mr Speaker has selected a manuscript amendment to the motion in the name of the hon. Gentleman. Again, copies of that amendment are available in the Vote Office and electronically. As I explained in relation to motion 5, under the practice of the House under current arrangements, a selected amendment to a motion that cannot be proceeded with after the moment of interruption constitutes an objection, so the motion cannot be taken.

Sir Christopher Chope: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Arising from the decision on motion 5, can you confirm that Westminster Hall will now still sit tomorrow to hear debates on, among other things, support for pupils' education during school closures, online anonymity, desecration of war memorials, and discharge into rivers—all debates that the Government sought, by motion 5, not to allow to take place tomorrow?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I can confirm that those debates will go ahead tomorrow in Westminster Hall.

South Downs National Park: 10th Anniversary

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Michael Tomlinson.*)

7.3 pm

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): It is a pleasure to rise on behalf of us all in Parliament to commemorate the 10 years since the South Downs national park, our nation's newest, was recognised with that status. In fact, like Her Majesty, the park technically has two birthdays as the park authority came into being on 1 April 2010 and became fully operational on 1 April 2011.

As its name suggests, my constituency of Arundel and South Downs picks up a large swathe of the South Downs national park, picking up the park at Pyecombe and Keymer and following its line north-west all the way to Selham and Graftham. That is a distance of some 34 miles, which is just over a third of the park's total 87-mile length, as it stretches across three counties, between Winchester and the south coast at the spectacular Seven Sisters, which I note were celebrated recently in one of the Royal Mail's latest national park stamps.

Like every 10-year-old, the authority does not get every single thing right, but we celebrate tonight its very many positive impacts, including a remarkable spirit of innovation and community. For that, I would like to personally commend chief executive Trevor Beattie, director of planning Tim Slaney, and director of countryside policy and management Andrew Lee for promoting and delivering such leading-edge work. Together with the park authority members, they have formed an effective and stable team, and it is very much their achievements that we recognise tonight.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing an important debate. May I recommend to him and to the House the strong collaboration that exists between South Downs national park and Public Health England on using the space and peace of our beautiful national parks as part of the social prescribing that GPs do? He will know that there is a wealth of evidence on the benefits of open space for not only physical health, but mental health. The South Downs national park's most important days may just lie ahead of it.

Andrew Griffith: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point, as a fellow representative of a constituency that contains part of the national park and as someone with personal experience in the space of healthcare. We have probably never needed those green spaces more than now to protect so many people's mental health.

Before I move on, I should also acknowledge my predecessor, now appropriately enough the noble Lord Herbert of South Downs, whose tenure covered the birth of the national park, and his continuing support to me. I hope that with such passionate representation, and with voluntary groups such as the Friends of the South Downs and many residents in both Houses, the park never lacks for support or a national voice.

The South Downs is unique in many ways. Perhaps most graphically, it is the only national park that someone could be strolling through in less than an hour and half's time from London, via the gateway stations of

Pulborough or Amberley. Perhaps when the current restrictions are lifted, I will be able to invite you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and hon. Members to join me in doing that—I promise you that you will not be disappointed.

About 110,000 people live within the park, which is more than live in the Lake district and the Peak district combined. A further 2.2 million live right on its doorstep, with another 4 million within an hour's drive. That position, right on the frontline of the over-developed south-east, makes it vital that the planning policy protections of the park are not eroded by this or any future Government. Indeed, if we are to avoid what I have referred to previously as the "Central Park effect" of intense development right up to the boundary, the planning system for national parks, which was set up 70 years ago in the context of some of the most remote parts of the UK, should now go further and establish buffer zones against development and green corridors for wildlife.

When we think of the South Downs, we picture the idyllic hilltops and ridges of the Chanctonbury Ring, Bignor hill or Devil's Dyke, but we must not overlook the high streets and small industrial units in the park that are its beating economic heart, providing employment and a vital sense of community. I refer to high streets such as those of Petworth and Arundel, in my constituency, as well as those of Midhurst and Lewes, which are full of unique small businesses, retailers and food producers. They need our support, whether through sensible planning policies, exhortations to shop local or initiatives such as the one-hour free parking offered by Chichester District Council in Petworth.

But there is one more thing that we need to do. This came up today when I was glad to co-sponsor a Bill on the subject promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake): we must look again at business rates, which tax place rather than profit and discriminate unfairly between business models in spreading the burden of taxation. If the price of fairness is to replace business rates with a higher rate of sales tax, to me and many businesses across the South Downs that would be a price worth paying.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I was going to intervene on the ten-minute rule Bill, but I did not have the chance. One of the worries about scrapping business rates is that so many businesses do not pay VAT—for example, supermarkets, insurance brokers and travel agents. That would be a real problem: we would end up having a mix and match, would we not?

Andrew Griffith: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, but I beg to differ. I do not want to turn this into a debate about taxation, but in my view it would be a simplification—business rates are highly complex, but the value added tax system is well understood and relatively simple in terms of compliance.

Another area of economic activity is the exceptional South Downs national park tourism offering. According to the South Downs National Park Authority, an astonishing 19 million visitors come to the park each year. Perhaps that is not so surprising when we think of the lovely picturesque walks through chalk hills and rural heathlands, the thousands of unique and artisan businesses, and the world-beating places to stay. It generates more than £350 million for the local economy,

[Andrew Griffith]

employing about 5,000 people—although, from my inbox during the pandemic, I believe that is a significant underestimate of what the sector contributes, because it does not lend itself to easy measurement.

If one thing keeps visitors coming back, it is our wonderful and diverse local country pubs. They are at the very heart of what community means to me. Some are literally centuries old, and never in their entire history of plagues and invasions have they had to face the unprecedented challenge of wave after wave of such Government restrictions. As well as making the case for continued support for hospitality businesses, one practical thing that I am doing is to produce a local guide to promote those vital establishments and, after this sad period of absence, to remind us all of their many and varied attractions. The park, too, is helping in the pandemic. Despite a limited budget, the park has established its own £375,000 covid recovery fund, with beneficiaries such as The Hungry Guest bakery, Sussex Lamb and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds' Pulborough Brooks reserve.

For more than 6,000 years, humankind has embraced the abundant natural resources that the South Downs has to offer. Farming started here in the bronze age and, with more than three quarters of the South Downs farmed and much of the remainder forest and woodland, the park works closely with farmers, foresters and estates. I am told that there are more sheep than people, so it was to the mutual relief of local farmers and me that we learned of the new trade agreement between the UK and the European Union recently, with its tariff-free access to markets for Sussex lamb producers. I am grateful to my local farmers and the National Farmers Union for the constructive dialogue that we had locally. Our departure from the European Union to me should be a huge opportunity to transform British agriculture, including more domestic market share, raising quality and sustainability, and improving the profitability of food production.

The national park has six farmer-led farm clusters that cover two thirds of the park, with the excellent Arun to Adur cluster in my constituency. They have pioneered the approach of whole estate plans with larger rural businesses. That gives the park authority a solid platform on which to work with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on the creation and delivery of the new environmental land management or ELM scheme, whose success is so vital to us all. I know that the cluster would welcome the opportunity to work with the Minister and his colleagues to develop landscape-scale proposals and for our farmers to be involved in the national pilot to ensure that ELM recognises biodiversity and access, and enhances our cultural heritage.

It is not just farming. In recent years, the fertile soils of the South Downs have witnessed the growth of vineyards, producing a variety of internationally recognised outstanding wines. With soil composition and south-facing slopes similar to those of the Champagne region of France, viticulture in the South Downs is rapidly becoming the heart of British wine country. The many distinguished sparkling wine producers across the South Downs include Nyetimber, Wiston, Hattingley and Bolney. I recently had the chance to see winemaker Dermot Sugrue at

work on the Wiston estate and, in what must be one of the only silver linings of that terrible year, he assured me that 2020 will produce one of the finest English vintages yet. Members might also be interested to know that, if their constituents visit and shop here for souvenirs, they can now purchase an English sparkling vintage from Digby Fine English, a producer of world-class English sparkling wine based in Arundel and the House of Commons gift shop official supplier. Buy now, as they say, while stocks last!

But if there is a single thing that excites me—and, I suspect, the Minister—most about the park, it is the contribution that it makes to nature and biodiversity. From the grazing marshes of the floodplains of the Rivers Arun and Adur to the lowland grassland on the slopes of the downs, the national park contains an amazing 660 protected sites of special interest and many internationally important habitats supporting rare and endangered species of plants and animals.

It is possible to spot iconic plant species such as burnt orchid, chaffweed and bulbous foxtail. Our heaths are home to adders, sand lizards and both the field cricket and the wart-biter bush cricket. Almost 40 different types of butterfly can be found within the park's boundary, including the exceptionally rare Duke of Burgundy, which was recently found to be thriving on the Wiston Estate. The South Downs farmland bird initiative has helped a wide range of threatened bird species found on farmland across the South Downs, including the grey partridge, lapwing, yellowhammer and skylark.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way; he is very generous with his time. I am a one-time resident of a lovely village on the Hampshire side of the South Downs national park. One problem faced by residents there is the appalling traffic and the pollution and noise, especially where traffic goes through ancient villages. Does he agree that Hampshire County Council and the Sussex county councils must do more to mitigate the effects of traffic pollution and noise?

Andrew Griffith: I thank my hon. Friend for his timely intervention and for touching on a topic that is of concern to many residents. I not only hold out the prospect of increased police numbers helping to police and make more safe our rural roads, but thank the Government—although I will hold their feet to the fire—for their recent commitment to upgrade the A27 with a new route that will allow significant traffic that currently uses the national park to bypass it and proceed elsewhere.

Nature recovery through partnership working has been at the heart of the work of the South Downs over the last decade, from major projects such as being one of 12 DEFRA-funded nature improvement areas, to smaller nature initiatives in partnership with landowners and local communities. An example of the latter is Steyning Downland, which is run by over 100 volunteers. It carries out local ecology surveys and habitat conservation but also combats local loneliness, something that is close to my heart. It is one of many such schemes across the national park.

As part of the Environment Bill, DEFRA proposes that every part of England should be covered by a local nature recovery strategy. Five pilots are under way, but

they are all based on county or unitary authority boundaries. I would like to see the national park given the chance to be at the heart of its own local nature recovery strategy, rather than an exclusively county-based approach. Will the Minister kindly give that her consideration?

On this 10th anniversary, let me conclude by looking ahead to what the park's second decade might hold. First, I hope that it continues to be well supported by the Minister and her Department, in terms of both financial certainty and the strengthening of certain powers that will allow the park to carry out its tasks further. Secondly, I hope that the recent integration of the Seven Sisters country park, a major change in the national park's operations, is successful and adds something without detracting from valuable work elsewhere. Thirdly, I hope, perhaps parochially, that we will see the long-awaited transformation of the derelict Shoreham cement works into low-carbon eco homes.

In its first 10 years, the South Downs national park has established itself as an innovative, partnership-based organisation where people and place come together. Tonight, we wish all involved well and express the hope that something that is so important to our nation's future as our national park survives, thrives and has a second decade that is even more successful in achieving all its many goals.

7.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): It is a pleasure to see you again, Madam Deputy Speaker; I have not been in the Chamber for quite some time.

I very much thank my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith) for securing this important and timely debate, celebrating the 10-year anniversary of the designation of South Downs national park—our newest addition to the national park family. How wonderful to have such a large chunk of this wonderful landscape in one's constituency. Lots of people would covet that. I am very pleased to join in celebrating the anniversary and to share in the praise of this wonderful landscape. I join in thanking all those who have been involved in this journey to protect and improve the national park throughout the 10 years; my hon. Friend name-checked a number of the key people involved along the way.

While I am praising people for things in the countryside, I would like also to praise and thank all those who have worked so hard to conserve and enhance our beautiful English countryside, particularly all the volunteers who give so much of their time to look after our countryside. About 45,000 days annually are given by volunteers not just to our protected landscapes, but all over the country. Indeed, there are also a lot of education officers, who have been working to give over 10,000 school visits to national parks every year. That has obviously been slightly curtailed over the past 10 months because of the pandemic, but it has been really valuable work, giving our young people a much-needed brush with nature. Our national parks have played such an important role in bringing the countryside to so many people.

National parks and areas of outstanding natural beauty are treasured landscapes in England. They are steeped in history and each has its own individual identity, which is what makes them so interesting. They

also tend to have their own individual communities and heritage. A lot of that comes initially from the underlying geology. There is a lot of chalk in the South Downs, and that influences the biodiversity and nature to which I am pleased my hon. Friend referred. He mentioned wonderful creatures, such as—what was it? The wart-biter bush cricket?

Andrew Griffith: The wart-biter bush cricket.

Rebecca Pow: The wart-biter—it sounds horrible, actually. But the Duke of Burgundy butterfly, which he also mentioned, is very special. That is to be much valued, as is the entire landscape in the area.

The pandemic has highlighted the critical role that our national parks play in our health and wellbeing; I was really pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) raised that point. These landscapes have been so important for people getting out and about on their walks, and for public access. People are obviously being told to stay local right now, but these landscapes have been—and will continue in the future to be—important to our health and wellbeing. Indeed, I see the national parks playing a very important role in our new green social prescribing, which I know my hon. Friend was very involved in during his previous role in the Department of Health.

The leadership that the South Downs national park authority has shown in establishing its recovery fund of £375,000 to support local communities and businesses at this time has been really welcome, because this period has been very challenging for all the people living and working there. It has also done some very inventive and helpful things such as virtual festivals and other online work. All our national parks have joined the national effort to tackle this pandemic, and our heartfelt thanks go to all of them.

I want quickly to mention the recent landscapes review led by Julian Glover, who looked at all our protected areas, and set out his vision for the future role that national parks and areas of outstanding natural beauty might play. The review highlighted the vital roles that these landscapes can play in addressing the twin challenges of nature recovery and climate change, and supporting the health and wellbeing of our communities. These issues are very much at the top of the Government's agenda, and we agree that protected landscapes will be very important in the future. As we approach the 70th anniversary of the creation of Britain's first four national parks, we will be looking closely at the recommendations of the Glover report, with a view to bringing forward some of them.

There are some really exciting opportunities for the South Downs going forward. My hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs has touched on some of them. Farmers working in this protected landscape will have opportunities through the new environmental land management schemes. He touched on the local nature recovery networks and we have national nature recovery networks as well—I take the points he made—but he did not mention dark skies, which I was surprised at. Did he leave something out of his speech?

Andrew Griffith: If the Minister will allow me, I will be very happy to mention dark skies. As she knows, I hosted an Adjournment debate as chairman of the

[Andrew Griffith]

all-party parliamentary group for dark skies on 14 December. As I suspect she was about to say, since 2016, the South Downs national park has been a member of the International Dark-Sky Association. It is one of the only places in the south-east from which one can see a dark sky and the Milky Way at night. That is very important to me and my constituents. I thank the Minister for raising an important topic.

Rebecca Pow: I am very glad that my hon. Friend had that opportunity to intervene, given that the subject is important to him. I enjoyed speaking to the APPG recently. The South Downs is now famed for its dark skies. Given that it has so many people living near it, it is interesting that it still manages to have these wonderful clear dark skies, where we can see all the stars. There are five protected dark sky reserves across England—Exmoor, near me, a wonderful place and one of my favourites, Cranborne Chase, the Yorkshire Dales, the North Yorkshire Moors and the South Downs, which has recently become an international dark sky reserve, for which it is to be absolutely commended. It brings so many millions of people into touch with the magical qualities of seeing a clear dark sky, with the whole cosmos around. As my hon. Friend pointed out, the national park is within an hour and a half's journey of London and other big centres. Many people will be able to benefit from that status.

My hon. Friend referred to one of the key roles of national parks, as local planning authorities. They can influence developments in their areas and act as statutory consultees. The South Downs must be commended for its handling of the West Sussex A27 Arundel bypass, which led to an interesting and successful outcome. The proposed new A27 would have involved building new roads in the park, but as a result of the intervention during the consultation process by the authority and other partners—the Environment Agency, Forestry Commission and Natural England—it will now go south of the national park, avoiding the degradation of natural beauty. That is only one of many examples where national parks have made key interventions to protect our landscapes and deliver their important statutory function.

My hon. Friend also touched on one other thing. With the Government having given the green light, I am pleased that the national park authority has taken responsibility for the Seven Sisters country park, named after the famous Seven Sisters chalk cliffs, which are on one of Britain's finest unspoilt coastlines and a haven for wildlife and migratory birds. The South Downs national park authority has ambitious plans to improve the country park by bringing in much-needed management

and investment to increase the visitor experience, the condition of the site of special scientific interest and the long-term plans to develop community programmes for schoolchildren from urban areas. The investment will promote and increase opportunities for people to access and explore the landscape in myriad ways, including by canoeing, cycling and walking.

It is not possible for our national landscapes to thrive and be the heart of our nation without the right investment, which is why, in the Chancellor's November 2020 spending review announcement for the next financial year, a commitment was made to invest more than £75 million in national parks and AONBs. The commitment represents £20 million in new funding for such landscapes and confirms the Government's commitment to ensuring that the environment is a key part of our economic recovery plan, as clearly demonstrated in the Prime Minister's recently announced 10-point green plan.

The 10-point plan will take forward so many measures and put climate change, nature restoration and the improvement of biodiversity right at the heart of all that we do. Indeed, we also have the green recovery challenge fund, of which £40 million has already been allocated to projects all across the country that will enhance nature and create more jobs. There is a huge opportunity there, and the second tranche of that fund, worth another £40 million, is about to open. Lots of non-governmental organisations and other organisations want to apply for that money.

Also on our environmental commitment, the Environment Bill is of course making progress through the House. It brings forward everything in our 25-year environment plan, including the commitment to protect 30% of the UK's land by 2030. So much is going on in this space, and rightly so, because it is going to be so important for our future and our recovery.

I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this wonderful subject to our attention today and allowing us to share with him the celebration of the 10th anniversary of the South Downs national park. I again congratulate him and all those involved on their superb work. I am very much looking forward to coming to the South Downs—when time permits and we are able—to experience some of it for myself, to see some of those glorious creatures and perhaps, Madam Deputy Speaker, to pop into those pubs and sample that sparkling wine.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Yes, I am looking forward to the 2020 Nyetimber.

Question put and agreed to.

7.31 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 12 January 2021

[MR LAURENCE ROBERTSON *in the Chair*]

India: Persecution of Minority Groups

9.30 am

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that there have been some changes to normal practice in order to support the new call list system and to ensure that social distancing can be respected. Members must arrive for the start of debates in Westminster Hall and are expected to remain for the wind-ups, provided there is space in the room. Members are asked to respect the one-way system around the room and to exit by the door on the left.

Members should sanitise their microphones using the cleaning materials provided before they use them, and should dispose of them as they leave the room. Members in the latter stages of the call list should use the seats in the Public Gallery and move on to the horseshoe when seats become available. Members can speak only from the horseshoe. They are strongly encouraged to wear masks at all times in the Chamber, other than when they speak.

9.31 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of persecution of Muslims, Christians and minority groups in India.

The right hon. Members for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), for East Ham (Stephen Timms), the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), and my hon. Friend the Member for South Antrim (Paul Girvan) and I applied to the Backbench Business Committee to have this debate almost eight months ago, so we are very pleased that it has now arrived. I note that debates in Westminster Hall will be suspended for a period of time, so this will be one of the last debates in here until we get to the other side of the pandemic.

I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have come here today to discuss the important issue of the persecution of Muslims, Christians and other minority groups in India. The issue has been in my heart for a long time. Given the correspondence that we have had, there is a need for this debate, so I am pleased to be here to promote it. I am my party's spokesperson for human rights issues and I register an interest as chair of the all-party group for international freedom of religion or belief. I remind this House that the Republic of India is the world's largest democracy. These facts are not in dispute. India has a freely elected Government and is not run by a nightmarish authoritarian regime such as China's, which arbitrarily imprisons millions from religious minorities and sponsors forced organ harvesting on an industrial scale, as we all know. Today in the main Chamber there will be a statement by the Minister in relation to the Uyghur Muslims.

India has a rich and unparalleled history of religious plurality and co-existence. The United Kingdom has always had a good relationship with India. Even today, hundreds of millions of people from different religions and backgrounds live together peacefully in modern-day

India. However, the reason for this debate is clear. India is not perfect in terms of freedom of religion or belief, and there has been a concerning trend when it comes to FORB violations over the past several years. Of course, this is not unique to India. Even in the UK we have recently seen record highs for incidents of antisemitism, Islamophobia and discrimination against Sikhs and other minority groups. Still, the scale and trajectory of the persecution currently being experienced in India by non-Hindus is very worrying and disturbing.

I talked beforehand to my friend and colleague from the Scots Nats party, the hon. Member for Glasgow East, and I said that those from India have to be able to take constructive criticism that is made in a friendly way but none the less highlights the issues that are the reason for this debate. Our debate will be in the spirit of that. I hope that through this debate and the Minister's, shadow Minister's and others' contributions we will be able to highlight the issues that we need India to address.

Despite Prime Minister Modi's pledge to commit to "complete freedom of faith", since his election in 2014 there has been a significant increase in anti-minority rhetoric—the complete opposite of what was said in 2014—from Bharatiya Janata party politicians, and I will quote some of the comments. India has also seen the rise of religious nationalist vigilante groups, growing mob violence, the spread of anti-conversion laws, worsening social discrimination, the stripping of citizenship rights and—increasingly—many other actions against religious or belief minorities. That is totally unreal and unacceptable, which is why we have to highlight it here in Westminster Hall today.

According to IndiaSpend's analysis of Indian Home Ministry data, there was a 28% rise in communal violence between 2014 and 2017, with 822 "incidents" being reported in 2017, which resulted in the deaths of 111 people and wounding of 2,384 people. A recent Pew Research Center report claimed that India had the highest level of social hostility and violence based on religion or belief of any country in the world. That is quite a statement to make, but when we look at the facts of the case, which is why this debate is being held, we see that India does rank as highly as that; the social hostility and violence based on religion or belief is the worst of any country in the world.

The covid-19 pandemic has further exacerbated problems for religious minorities in India. Through the APPG, I obviously receive comments and information, but I also receive them from religious groups, such as Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Release International, the Barnabas Fund and Open Doors; I think that the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet will tomorrow launch the Open Doors strategy after what has happened in the last year. We very much look forward to that, because I believe that it will highlight not just India but other parts of the world where these problems exist.

At the beginning of the covid-19 outbreak, two dozen Muslim missionaries tested positive for the virus after an international event in Delhi. This led to accusations that Muslims were deliberately spreading the virus and to a campaign of Islamophobia in which Muslims were labelled as "bio-terrorists" and "corona-jihadists", and discriminated against. This scapegoating of Muslims was picked up and supported by political leaders such as the Minister for Minority Affairs of the BJP, who accused the event organisers of a "Talibani crime".

[*Jim Shannon*]

What a play on words that is. In no way had those missionaries ever done such a thing; they went to the event to follow their religious beliefs and worship their God. But they were made a target for doing so. And another BJP leader from Uttar Pradesh told citizens:

“Do not buy from Muslims.”

I mean, where does it all stop? That is my concern about the whole thing.

Furthermore, over 3,000 Muslims were forcibly detained by Government authorities for more than 40 days under the guise of protecting public health. Well, public health is for everyone and we cannot blame one person or one group for it, and those Muslims certainly did not set out to do anything wrong. Nevertheless, as a result of this stigmatisation, countless more instances of violence against Muslims in India have been recorded. So, those 20 or so Muslim missionaries, who were worshipping in a careful way, were then focused on and made the targets of verbal violence, which has now spread to other parts of India.

One attack that was caught on video showed a Muslim being beaten with a bamboo stick by a man asking him about his conspiracy to spread the virus. Really? Because they are a Muslim, they are spreading the virus? No, they are not, and to make such an accusation is completely wrong.

Other minority groups in India have also suffered such violence. For example, on 3 February 2019, a 40-strong mob attacked the church in Karkeli village, near Raipur. Fifteen worshippers were hospitalised after church members were beaten with sticks. Where is religious tolerance in India, when it was said in 2014 that there would be such tolerance? The facts are that it is not happening.

Similarly, on 25 November 2020, an estimated 100 Christians from Singavaram village in India's Chhattisgarh state were also attacked. Christian Solidarity Worldwide's sources reported that a mob of around 50 people armed with home-made weapons attacked the Christians during the night while they slept. The mob burned their Bibles and accused their victims of destroying the local culture by following a foreign religion. Again, I find that greatly disturbing—indeed, I find the whole thing very hard to understand.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate my hon. Friend and colleagues on their campaigning—we have all campaigned—on matters such as this. As he outlines some of these issues, does he agree that one of the ways we can address this is not just in debates such as this, which are exceptionally worthwhile, but by encouraging others who have influence in the Indian subcontinent also to take these issues seriously; to lobby the Indian Government and campaign to ensure that the progress that the Indian people and Governments have made in recent decades is stepped up and increased and the sort of items that the hon. Gentleman has outlined are clamped down on, so that we do not see them in the future?

Jim Shannon: I wholeheartedly accept my hon. Friend's intervention. The spokesperson for the Scots Nats party, the hon. Member for Glasgow East, will also be doing something similar. I hope to meet the Indian high

commissioner next week, with others from Northern Ireland who have asked to speak to me. When it comes to making changes, we should do so in a constructive fashion. I hope that next week we can reinforce the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) and try to influence those in positions of power to make the changes.

When attacks happen in villages across India, they are sanctioned, at least verbally or by non-action, by the police and Army. That sometimes encourages people to go ahead with what they are doing. The 50 people armed with home-made weapons who attacked Christians during the night when they slept and burned their Bibles might be able to burn the Holy Bible and the word of God, but they did not in any way stop its teaching of how we should love others and follow its truths. Unfortunately, much of the violence against minorities is not appropriately investigated by Government authorities. It happens all the time and it is so frustrating whenever the police or Army stand back and do not act. When they are told what has happened, they do not investigate to the full extent, catch those involved and have them taken before the courts and imprisoned. Basically, they encourage perpetrators. In 2018, the Indian Supreme Court went so far as to urge the central and state Governments to bring back lynching restrictor laws and had to do so again in 2019, after no substantial action was taken.

In all these debates, we have a verbal commitment to change, but no physical action to prove it. That is what I find incredibly frustrating. In addition, Christian organisations have noted worsening patterns of discrimination against our communities in India. There have been reports of Christians who will not participate in Hindu rituals being denied employment. How often have we seen that, because they do not conform to what the Government want them to do, they are cut off from the water supply and prevented from even burying their dead? These are cruel actions by those in power.

Moreover, 80 year-old Father Stan Swamy, who has been an advocate for the rights of the poor and marginalised in India for 50 years has been unjustly held captive by the National Investigation Agency of India for alleged Maoist links. I hope that the Minister will reply to this point—if not today in the Chamber—and tell all those here who are interested how we can help that gentleman get out of prison.

Another issue is the spread of anti-conversion laws in India, which make me very angry. They are ostensibly designed to protect people, but often restrict the freedom of individuals to freely convert and deny their right to freedom of religion or belief. If you want to be a Christian, you have a right to be a Christian; if you want to be a Muslim, that is your choice; if you want to be a Hindu, that is your choice; if you want to be a Jehovah's Witness or a Baha'i or a Coptic Christian, it is your right to do that. The anti-conversion laws in India that prevent you from doing that are despicable.

According to the US Commission on International Freedom of Religion or Belief, authorities predominantly arrest Muslims and Christians for conversion activities, whereas mass conversions to Hinduism often take place without any interference from the authorities. They have double standards, powered by the anti-conversion laws and often with the police's complicity, right-wing groups conduct campaigns of harassment, social exclusion

and violence against Christians, Muslims and other religious minorities across the whole country. Worryingly, this law seems to be strengthening. Four more Indian states are planning to introduce anti-conversion laws in 2021, in this year—more stringent laws to deliberately persecute and disenfranchise Christians, Muslims, and other religious groups. If that happens, close to two thirds of India's 1.3 billion people will be under some anti-conversion law. That is how far this goes, Mr Chairman, and that is why it is so important to highlight it today.

Before I finish—I have a couple of pages to go—I feel obliged to mention the Citizenship Amendment Act, or the CAA as it is known, which was passed into law in India in 2019 and provides a fast track to Indian citizenship for non-Muslim migrants from certain neighbouring countries. The CAA is very concerning because making faith a condition for citizenship flies in the face of both Article 18 of the United Nations universal declaration of human rights and the Indian constitution. To decide that and pass it into law is wrong. Its defenders say that it prohibits religious discrimination; that it is designed to protect minorities who have been persecuted in neighbouring states.

You leave a neighbouring state where you are facing persecution and you end up in India and the persecution continues, just by a different person, or a different Government, or a different rule. This can never be acceptable. It is difficult to accept, given that the Act does not include the Ahmadiyya Muslims from Pakistan, and I want to make a plea for them today as well. The right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet has been a spokesperson for that cause on many occasions. I know that she would ask me and others to speak up for the Ahmadiyya Muslims as well, arguably the most persecuted minority group in that country.

The Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar have experienced ethnic cleansing and potential genocide at the hands of the Burmese military. How many of us have not been absolutely cut to the heart by what has happened to them? The Indian Government have deported Rohingya refugees rather than seeking to offer them a means to citizenship; a means to better themselves; a means of helping them.

The CAA is particularly concerning when it is considered in conjunction with the National Register of Citizens, the NRC. The NRC requires Indians to prove in court that they came to the state by 24 March 1971, or they will be declared illegal migrants. When the Assam state NRC was released in August 2019, 1.9 million residents were excluded. Why? Because they did not suit the form, the type of people India wanted. Those affected live in fear of statelessness, deportation or prolonged detention. They need protection. I hope that the Minister will be able to give us some indication of what is happening in relation to that.

The Indian Government have plans to introduce a nationwide NRC, under which the citizenship of millions would be placed in question. However, with the CAA in place, non-Muslims will have a path to restore their citizenship and avoid detention or deportation, whereas Muslims would have to bear the consequences of potential statelessness. It just cannot be right to have a two-tier focus on those who are Christians, those who are Muslims, and those who are Hindus.

This move bears worrying similarities to the plight of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, who, in 1982, also had their citizenship removed and were labelled illegal

immigrants before being demonised and then eventually attacked by the Burmese military. The stories that we heard of the Rohingyas and what they had to go through were outrageous. I think they worried every one of us and probably brought tears to our eyes. People were killed and butchered or abused, their homes burned, just because they were Rohingyas.

If this sounds like an extreme comparison, I point hon. Members to the words of Amit Shah, the Indian Home Minister, who, in 2019, described people considered to be illegal immigrants as “termites”, and said that,

“A Bharatiya Janata Party government will pick up infiltrators one by one and throw them into the Bay of Bengal.”

If that is not inflamed rhetoric, if that does not inflame the situation, if that is not a hate crime in the very words of a person in power, I don't know what is. I feel greatly disturbed, greatly annoyed, angered even, that any person in a position of power, but especially the Indian Home Minister, should say anything like that.

To conclude, I reiterate that India is a great ally of the UK, but it must be possible to have constructive criticism among allies and friends. We must come to Westminster Hall and this House and say the things that are factual on behalf of those who have no voice. Great Britain, our Government and our Minister work extremely hard to put forward the case on behalf of those across the world who do not have someone to speak for them: those who, in their own country, where they have lived for many years, do not have the rights that we have—and they do not have those rights as immigrants, either. It is our responsibility to raise those concerns not just on behalf of the minorities who are persecuted but for the benefit of all Indian and British people.

The large majority of people in India believe in fair play and the right to religious belief, but there are those—some in positions of power—who are not prepared to allow that. Violations of freedom of religious belief lead to domestic conflict, which is good neither for India's economic prosperity, nor for the chances of a stable, long-term trading relationship between India and the UK. We want to have that relationship, but we also want human rights to be protected. Those of different religions should have the opportunity to worship their God and to work, have houses and businesses and live a normal life without being persecuted because they happen to be of a different religion.

I urge the Minister to support his Indian counterparts to realise the political, strategic and economic benefits of guaranteeing the rule of law and human rights. I also call on him—I believe he is a Minister who wants to help, and his response will reflect that—to ensure that robust human rights provisions are included in any future trade and investment agreements with India. If we are to have a relationship with India—we do want that relationship—it is important that that is reflected. We in this country have high regard for human rights, the right to worship a God and the religious freedom that we have, and that should be had in India, too. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for coming; I have left them plenty of time to participate.

9.52 am

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): We should congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on ensuring that we had the debate and on

[*Sir Edward Leigh*]

the comprehensive way in which he moved it. I suppose we started having such debates—some instituted by him and others by me—20 years ago, and I think we have made progress in ensuring that the Government take a more active role in such matters. When we started off, Governments were, frankly, careful to be equidistant: they said, “On the one hand, there is persecution of Christians, but on the other hand, that.” The truth is that, although in India the victims of persecution are overwhelmingly Muslims, the victims of persecution worldwide are overwhelmingly Christian. Actually, in recent years the Government have had the courage to stand up more and more for human rights, the right of Christians to profess their faith and the rights of people of other faiths to convert to Christianity. These Westminster Hall debates may not seem important in the great scheme of things, but they are all part of a pressure on the Government, and our Government has a moral duty to speak out as for centuries—certainly for the last century—Governments have spoken out in favour of human rights throughout the world.

I hesitated to take part in the debate because India is an incredibly complex country with an amazing history. Hinduism is integral to India—80% of the population are Hindu—and it is the most wonderful religion. Those who go to India, as I have, realise that it is part of the country’s DNA. I do not condone Hindu nationalism in any way, but we need to understand how Hindus feel that theirs is the religion of India. That said, there have been Muslims in India for many hundreds of years, so presumably they were living there when they originally converted to Islam. The same applies to Christianity. Christianity is also integral to India. There have been Christians in India for the best part of 2,000 years. It is the third largest religion. There are 200 million Muslims, but there are still 30 million Christians—a huge number—in the country. According to legend and, undoubtedly, in fact, India was one of the first lands reached by early Christians. In Kerala, they date their Christianity back to the Apostle Thomas himself. And parts of north-eastern India even have a Christian majority.

Despite the electoral success of Modi and the BJP, it has to be said that although Hindus are still the overwhelming part of the population, their proportion of the population has been declining. No doubt that engenders a feeling of threat, but, dare I say it—I am not here to lecture anybody else’s country—nobody needs to feel under threat from Islam or Christianity in India. Hinduism will always be an absolutely integral part of the nation and overwhelmingly the majority religion.

Despite that and perhaps for political reasons—this is where nationalism is extremely dangerous—politicians around the world feel that they can use religion quite wrongly to promote themselves, get into office and stir up their followers. We just have to accept this, and our Government, in their dealings with the Modi Government, have to accept that the BJP has sharpened its tone against India’s religious minorities. There is absolutely no doubt about that; it is on the record.

Between 1967 and 2020, six states introduced laws or ordinances aiming to stop conversions. It is a dangerous thing to convert to Christianity in India, but there has to be some equivalence drawn, too. Let us make it

absolutely clear that it is even more dangerous to convert to Christianity in Pakistan. We have to condemn absolutely this feeling in many countries of the world that it is wrong to convert or change religion, in any direction. Those ordinances and laws are often made, perversely, in the guise of protecting freedom of religion. In 2015, Rajnath Singh, India’s then Minister of Home Affairs, called for a national debate on anti-conversion laws and said that one was needed at national level. However, although the Indian Government undoubtedly set an antichristian and anti-Muslim tone, I am afraid—well, I am not afraid; it is just a fact—that the fact is that violent intimidation at street level does the most harm, and much more harm than the Government or what they say.

As reported by Aid to the Church in Need—by the way, I am closely connected with Aid to the Church in Need; it does wonderful work throughout the world and should be congratulated on its very detailed reports—there was

“no sign of anti-Christian violence abating during India’s COVID-19 lockdown. In the first six months of 2020 one Indian NGO recorded 293 cases of persecution.”

Bishop Gerald Almeida of Jabalpur says:

“It is a cause of concern with the Church because Christians are being killed and beaten... There are much more attacks than ten years ago. Fundamentalism is a real problem.”

The Indian Government’s own figures, released in 2018, show an upward trend in inter-religious violence, and one has to ask why there is an upward trend. Is the tone being set by Government themselves? In 2016, 86 people were killed in sectarian violence and 2,321 were injured in 703 incidents. The following year, that rose to 111 people killed and 2,384 injured; there were 822 incidents in 2017. Between 2017 and the end of March 2019, there were more than 1,000 individual attacks on Christians.

The attacks are also widespread. In recent years, they have taken place in 24 out of India’s 29 states. In Odisha state in May 2019, local officials sent a team of 50 workers to demolish a Christian school and children’s hostel near Lichapeta. The school’s application for recognition of land tenure was suspiciously lost. Hindutva nationalism is pervading the actions of many officials in the Indian Government, from the Ministers at the top to local government bureaucrats.

Before I sit down, it would be quite wrong not to mention—as I think I have already said once, but I now emphasise—that the overwhelming victims of violence and discrimination in India are Muslims, and this follows decades of discrimination. Riots in north-east Delhi last year resulted in Muslim homes and businesses being destroyed; of the 53 dead from six days of violence, two thirds were Muslims—who had been shot, slashed or set on fire.

India is the world’s largest functioning democracy, and we should be proud of that. We are inextricably linked to India through our shared history, not all of which has been happy or peaceful. With more than 1 billion people, it is the largest Commonwealth country by a huge margin. On a number of fronts, India is a friend of Britain and a country we want to trade with more, deal with more, and visit. However, true friendship requires not turning a blind eye to each other’s faults, and we must protest the violence and persecution in India today. I hope that this debate is a small step in the right direction.

10.1 am

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): Before I begin, I want to say that I resent having to come here this morning. I also resent the fact that this will be one of the last debates that we are able to have in Westminster Hall. Scrutiny is very important, and the scrutiny we do in this Chamber is important, but we should be able to do it remotely and observe the guidance that the Government have given to others.

Imagine when the Windrush scandal broke in the UK if there had been a debate in the Indian Parliament about the persecution of black people in Britain. Or, in 2011, when the London riots broke out after the police shooting of Mark Duggan, that there had been questions asked in the Indian Parliament about the impartiality of the Metropolitan police, and how it was that they stood by and did not use force to stop the rioters for four days before those riots were brought under control. Imagine that there had been debates in the Indian Parliament all through the troubles in Northern Ireland, accusing the British Government of persecuting the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland.

I say this, not to minimise the subject that hon. Members have brought for debate in this Chamber today—injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere—but to give ourselves a sense of humility and a little perspective about how we might feel, as parliamentarians, if legislators in India were to pronounce on our institutions from afar, putting us under the microscope in the same way that colleagues are doing for their Indian counterparts today.

Add to that the fact that the UK is the former colonial power, whose influence in what is now India, Pakistan and Bangladesh was not entirely beneficent, and certainly not above pitting one religious or ethnic group against the other. In this light, it is not beyond ordinary powers of imagination to conceive that people in India might not regard our intervention as either wholly welcome or appropriate.

Many of my own constituents—British citizens whose families were originally from India—have written to me, outraged by the very fact that we are holding this debate at all. One of my constituents' letters says:

“It is a very difficult time in the UK due to the severe impact of the coronavirus pandemic. It is surprising to know that elected British Members of Parliament are debating subjects attacking the Government of India, rather than focusing on UK priorities.”

There is of course a debate on covid in the Commons Chamber today, and I do not think that we must confine our debates only to immediate to domestic priorities, so perhaps I should have begun my remarks by declaring my interests. I am a Christian and I therefore have an interest to prevent the persecution of my fellow Christians; but, then, I am also a human being and I have never understood how anyone can feel themselves honoured by the humiliation, let alone the persecution, of a fellow being. I am also the founding chair of Labour Friends of India, and as one of India's longest-standing friends in the UK Parliament, I am keen to see that the true nature of Indian democracy is properly represented and not distorted.

Sir Edward Leigh: Will the hon. Gentleman allow me?

Barry Gardiner: I shall refer to the right hon. Gentleman's remarks later, but at this point I will continue to make some progress. I represent the constituency of Brent North, which only Newham, which includes the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), might be able to rival for diversity of ethnicity and religious faith. Perhaps 40% of the families in my constituency are originally from the Indian subcontinent. Many are Hindu and many are Muslim and I am equally at home visiting the mosque or the mandir.

As a Christian, I remember the appalling murder of the Christian missionary Graham Staines in Odisha. He was burned to death with his two little boys, aged 10 and six, when Dara Singh led a group of Hindu militants who set light to the van that they were sleeping in. I think I was the first person in this Parliament to raise the matter with the then high commissioner, my good friend Lalit Mansingh. As a human being, I also remember that Dara Singh murdered the Muslim trader Sheikh Rehman, chopping off his hands before setting him alight too. Psychopaths and murderers exist in all countries, but when talking of persecution it is important to examine how the authorities in those countries respond to such atrocities. The Indian constitution is, importantly, a secular constitution and it provides for protections of minority communities including Sikhs, Muslims, Jains, Buddhists and Christians. Though different political parties have formed the Government since its independence, all have respected the constitution and worked within its boundaries, so it is important to say that 21 years later, Dara Singh is still serving a life sentence for his crimes. It is also important that he was convicted in the year 2000 when Atal Bihari Vajpayee was the Prime Minister, at the head of a Hindu nationalist BJP Government.

In June 2017, in response to the growing violence of Hindu mobs known as cow vigilantes, it was the current Hindu nationalist Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, who spoke out against that violence and proclaimed that killing people in the name of protecting cows was criminal, illogical and unacceptable. When the Muslim trader Alimuddin Ansari was later lynched by a Hindu mob for allegedly transporting beef, 11 people were sentenced to life imprisonment, including one local BJP worker. That justice was meted out by a fast-track court and was the first case ever successfully prosecuted against such religious extremists in India. The state acted. It did not sanction the atrocities. Are there atrocities in India? Yes, there are. Are they often perpetrated against religious minorities? Yes, they are. Do they represent persecution by the state? No, they do not. Islam is the second largest religion in India. There are 40 million Muslims in Uttar Pradesh alone. As the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) said, there are 1.4 billion people in India and the second largest population is Muslim. He spoke of 1,000 attacks on minorities.

Jim Shannon: I understand the point that the hon. Gentleman is trying to make, but what has unfortunately not come across yet—I ask him to reflect on this—is the fact that, in the legal system in India, four more Indian states are to introduce anti-conversion laws. That means that 1.3 billion people will be under specific state law and state changes that disadvantage them, and 1.9 million Rohingyas do not have the right of citizenship. I understand the points that the hon. Gentleman

[*Jim Shannon*]

is making, but I have to say this: we are here to speak on behalf of those who have no voice. We should be their voice in this Chamber.

Barry Gardiner: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making his points so clearly. Let me try to address them. He spoke of Muslims being stripped of their citizenship rights—no. Actually, they are not stripped of rights that they ever had. They were not citizens; they were classed as illegal migrants into the country.

It is very important when talking about India and religious persecution to consider the Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2019. India is one of the world's top destinations for illegal migrants. Most are Muslims who come from the neighbouring countries of Bangladesh and Pakistan. The Pew Research Center estimates that they number 3.2 million and 1.1 million from Bangladesh and Pakistan respectively. The Act provided a pathway for illegal migrants to become citizens of India where they had been victims of religious persecution in Pakistan, Bangladesh or Afghanistan. It established the important legal principle of non-refoulement by offering shelter to refugees who fled those countries due to discrimination based on religion. It gave that right to Christians, Parsis, Jains and Buddhists.

The Act was passed in both the Lok Sabha, where the BJP Government hold a majority, and the upper Rajya Sabha, where they do not. It sparked riots and outrage because the pathway was not open to Muslims. The argument applied by the Indian Government is that those are Muslim countries, and therefore Muslims coming to India as migrants could not be persecuted religious minorities.

The right hon. Member for Gainsborough spoke about Ahmadiyya Muslims, and I entirely agree with him. The Indian Government say that the legislation discriminates not against Muslims per se, but only against illegal immigrants who do not have a well-founded fear of persecution in their country of origin. There is a basic logic to that argument, and I disagree with it. It is clear to me that if someone is an Ahmadiyya Muslim or a gay Muslim, it is perfectly possible—indeed, highly probable—that they have suffered religious persecution in one of those countries. It is also possible that Christians or Parsis have come without actually having a well-founded fear of being persecuted. They may simply be an illegal migrant, rather than a genuine refugee. Better, in my view, that the law should seek not to treat illegal immigrants on the basis of broad religious categories at all, but to consider each individual case on its merit. However, India is a sovereign country with an established democracy, and I respect its right to enact legislation whether or not I think it clumsy or ill-framed.

As people criticise India for legislation that is giving citizenship to tens of thousands of illegal immigrants, perhaps we should recall that just in December, a British Home Office Minister complained to the Home Affairs Committee that we had been unable to get the French to agree to a policy of turning back migrant boats in the channel. As India enacts the principle of non-refoulement, we are busy trying to do the opposite. Sometimes, as a Christian, I think we would do better to cast out the beam from our own eye, and then we might see clearly to cast out the mote from our neighbour's.

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): Before I call the next speaker, I ask the three next speakers to limit their speeches to five minutes each.

10.15 am

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship in this important debate, Mr Robertson. India is a vibrant, pluralist and secular democracy. Its constitution declares clearly that freedom of religion is a fundamental right. Article 15 outlaws discrimination on the grounds of religion, and a series of other articles provide further protections, including in relation to schools. Those rights are safeguarded by respect for the rule of law and an independent judiciary, supported by bodies such as the National Commission for Minorities and the National Human Rights Commission. An enduring goal of the Indian state has been diversity and inclusion, and a national minorities rights day is observed on 18 December every year.

The size of India's minority populations has been growing in recent years, and India is, for example, home to 16% of the world's Muslim population. Members of minority faiths have played a prominent part in India's history and they continue to hold leading roles in Indian politics and public life, in science and universities, in the law and other professions, in business and culture, and across the Indian economy. Let us just take one, symbolic example. In 2004, a Catholic, Sonia Gandhi, facilitated the handover of power to a Sikh, Manmohan Singh, enabling him to become Prime Minister, with his oath of office overseen by a Muslim President, A. P. J. Abdul Kalam.

As Members present will know, I take seriously matters related to freedom of religion, whether it is Islam or Christianity. I have raised those matters in this House many times and will continue to do so. Sadly, in a country as huge as India, there will be lawbreakers who attack others, including members of minority communities and faiths. Sadly, no state can prevent all such crimes and tragedies, no matter how seriously they take policing and justice. Of course, there are hard-line individuals in India who promote hate speech and division, just as there are in this country. Again, no democracy that allows freedom of speech can shut that down either.

However, I argue that India's record on minority faiths stands up to scrutiny. I do not accept that there is evidence of systemic or state-sponsored persecution of religious minorities. When it comes to protection of freedom of religion and belief, the more important focus of this House should be on places such as Pakistan, where forced marriage and forced conversion of young Hindu and Christian women is a serious problem, and from where Asia Bibi had to flee for her life after years of imprisonment, and China, where incarceration and oppression of Uyghur Muslims is, quite frankly, a disgrace.

Mr Modi's Government has embarked on a huge reform agenda, tackling issues that his predecessors ducked because they were just too difficult. Change on this scale inevitably causes controversy and conflict in India, just as it would elsewhere. All such crimes must be fully investigated to bring anyone responsible to justice. In any democracy, there is further work to be done to safeguard and protect human rights, and bring to justice those who commit crimes of violence against others, including religious minorities. It will be important for some of the serious matters raised in this debate to

be considered in India. No doubt, they debate similar matters in their Parliament, in the same way that we do, and the concerns raised by Open Doors and Christian Solidarity Worldwide must be carefully considered. In a country as vast as India, with so many different communities, ethnicities and faiths, there are some unavoidable tensions and it is a matter of massive regret that, sometimes, that can spill over into conflict and violence. However, the principles of unity and diversity have been a core aspiration and value of the Indian state ever since its creation.

India is a stable and increasingly prosperous home to around 200 million Muslims and 32 million Christians. While, like any country, its record on law and order and security cannot always be 100% perfect, it is still a huge democratic success story. Rapid economic development and Government action are also starting to bring many millions of people out of poverty. If we are considering some worrying points raised in this debate, let us also at the same time remember the hugely positive progress in India, which is benefiting so many of its citizens, including millions from India's minority and minority faith communities.

10.20 am

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this debate.

"It's time the Modi government learned they cannot promote 'Make in India' abroad while condoning the propagation of 'Hate in India' at home."

Those are not my words but those of Shashi Tharoor, an author and Indian politician, highlighting the reality of India under a BJP Government.

With the rise of nationalist politics all over the world, we have seen the threat to minority rights. With Trump 2.0 in charge in India, in the form of Narendra Modi, we are witnessing before our eyes the scaling down of the secular, liberal rights for which Indian democracy once hailed itself. Power politics has an interesting link with the legitimacy of an individual, especially in the case of Narendra Modi, a man once barred from the US because of his alleged role in the 2002 Gujarat massacre, which saw more than 2,000 Muslims murdered and some newspapers giving him the title, "the butcher of Gujarat". Today he is invited on to red carpets across the globe, including in Britain.

Narendra Modi does not just attract a nationalist crowd with his populist rhetoric; he is directly involved. He is a life member of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, which is inspired by the likes of Adolf Hitler and Mussolini and the ideas of an Aryan race. The RSS is built on an ideology of the superiority of Hindus, and the group's mission statement calls for change to the policy of

"endless appeasement of the Muslim population".

In reality, what they see as the ending of appeasement towards Muslims is seen by the world as the ending of equality towards Muslims in India. Over the years, mob attacks on Muslim communities in India have risen. Only last year, five Muslim men, severely beaten by police officers, were forced to sing the national anthem. Two days later, one of the men, a 23-year-old Muslim, was murdered. Later, we witnessed a nationalist mob

launch riots in New Delhi. More than 52 people were killed, hundreds injured, places of worship and property destroyed, with the majority of victims being Muslims.

It is not just extremist mobs that are changing the landscape in India. It is directly ingrained in the policies pursued by the BJP Government. The controversial citizenship law and the national registration of citizenship directly discriminate against Muslims. The citizenship law ensures that Hindus and people of other faiths who live in India have an automatic right to citizenship, whereas Muslims do not. In 2019, the Home Affairs Minister Amit Shah said,

"I today want to assure Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Buddhist and Christian refugees, that you will not be forced to leave India".

That outrightly left out Muslims.

A *New York Times* investigation in Assam province found Muslims, who have lived their entire lives in India with voter ID, birth certificates and marriage certificates, being sent to foreigners tribunals to prove their citizenship. One man, Asbahar Ali, due to a spelling error by the authorities on his documentation, was sent to prison for four years. His family sold the house to pay for legal costs and his wife committed suicide. The same investigation found five officials of the foreigners tribunals, such as Mamoni Rajkumari, claimed they were dismissed from their posts because they accepted the citizenship of too many Muslims.

If one believed that the discrimination against Muslims in India is just hearsay, consider the words of an MP and BJP leader, Dr Swamy. In defence of controversial citizenship laws in an interview, he stated,

"We know where the Muslim population is large and there's always trouble...If Muslims become more than 30%, that country is in danger."

When challenged for his hateful comments, he asserted he was being kind to Muslims by not letting them into India, because equality does not apply to them, as they fit into a completely different category.

The Bishop of Truro's independent review for the Foreign Secretary in 2019 found rising levels of hate and attacks on Christians in India. The report mentions 750 reported cases of Christian persecution in India in 2017 alone. Recently, we have witnessed the use of brute force with water cannon on Indian farmers, who are mainly Sikhs. Other marginalised groups such as Dalits, those of lower caste or even non-religious groups such as humanists have often been at the forefront of hate and discrimination in India.

India is at a pivotal point. While its economic advance is set to lead it to become the third biggest economy by 2035, its political advance is set to eradicate the legacy of Gandhism based on a pluralist India. The world is also at a pivotal point because nations like ours need to make a choice between turning a blind eye to the Nazi-inspired ideology taking charge in the ruling party of India in favour of economic trade, or standing by persecuted minorities and the very values of Gandhism.

If our words fall on deaf ears, then the world should not be shocked if minorities in India push towards a path of ethnic cleansing in the future. India has a choice to make, but so does the rest of the world.

10.25 am

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): There is an indivisible historic bond that we have been reminded of between the UK and India. India is rightly admired as the

[Stephen Timms]

world's biggest democracy, and its economic achievements have been staggering. My hon. Friend the Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) rightly paid tribute to the constitution of India drawn up under the leadership of Dr B. R. Ambedkar, which says

“all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practise and propagate religion.”

It is a model for such a vast and richly diverse nation. However, India is seeing growing violence against religious minorities.

As the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) said, the latest Open Doors World Watch List will be launched tomorrow. For the last two years, India has been in 10th place on that list of the worst countries for the persecution of Christians, and the position is not going to improve, as I understand it, in the list being published tomorrow. Now that would once have been unconceivable; 10 years ago it was down at No. 32. The current Indian Government was elected in 2014 and in 2016, Open Doors put India for the first time among the world's worst 20 countries and the report that year referred to

“a surge of militant Hindu pressure on religious minorities, most frequently Muslims and Christians.”

In 2019, India entered the worst 10 countries. The US Commission on International Religious Freedom recommended that year that India be designated a country of particular concern. Human Rights Watch reported in 2019:

“The government failed to properly enforce Supreme Court directives to prevent and investigate mob attacks”.

India remained in the top 10 last year. Open Doors reports four religiously motivated murders of Christians in the first half of 2020 and eight just in the third quarter.

We have been reminded that Christians and Muslims account for 20% of India's population. I paid a wonderful visit to Kerala in 2017 where the location of churches established by the Apostle Thomas were pointed out to me. Islam arrived between the 12th and 16th centuries. Both religions have been very significant in India's development. The problem is, and this point has rightly been made, that it is not that the state is perpetrating violence against minority religions but, to quote Christian Solidarity Worldwide:

“Right-wing groups are emboldened by a culture of impunity due to state negligence or complicity.”

Government inaction has meant that mob lynching against Muslims and Dalits and violence against Christians and humanists are increasing. The Government are not always negligent, but they have often been negligent.

A report from the London School of Economics published at the end of 2019 entitled “WhatsApp Vigilantes” refers to more than a hundred lynchings since 2015, many against Dalits, Muslims, Christians and Adivasis, carried out by

“mobs of vigilantes who use peer-to-peer messaging applications such as WhatsApp to spread lies about the victims, and use misinformation to mobilise, defend, and in some cases to document and circulate images of their violence.”

We have been reminded that covid-19 seems to have increased the problems. When our Prime Minister visits India, he must raise this issue. When Ministers such as

the one who is with us this morning visit India, I hope they will meet religious minorities. That will be a huge source of encouragement.

Meeting in the USA and in India, Donald Trump and Narendra Modi have heaped praise on each other. At the moment, we are seeing where America-first politics leads playing out in the US. Every community needs to feel protected; it is not enough to protect only the majority, and the authorities in India need to act against those who perpetrate violence towards Muslims, Christians, Dalits, humanists and other religious minorities.

10.30 am

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for leading today's debate on behalf of the APPG for freedom of religion or belief. In paying tribute to fellow APPG members, I also congratulate the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on her appointment as the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief. I know that she has a personal passion for this subject, and I do not doubt at all that she will be an outstanding envoy for the Government, so I wish her well on behalf of my party.

In the run-up to this morning's debate, I have to say that I have been fascinated—indeed, quite perplexed—by the knee-jerk reaction to the debate. That extends to the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner): if I followed the logic of his remarks that we should not be interfering in the domestic politics of other countries, particularly countries that the UK once ruled over, surely the same would be true of the United States of America, but I recall that fairly recently he had lots to say about George Floyd. The reality is that foreign affairs is a reserved matter for this Parliament, and it is entirely right for Members of this House to comment on it.

Barry Gardiner: I do not doubt for a moment that we should be engaged in foreign affairs, and we have the right to debate what we wish in this House. I did not suggest otherwise; what I did say was that we should always do so with a sense of humility and appropriateness, and in this particular case, remembering that we were a colonial power that was engaged in pitting one section of the community against the other for over 200 years.

David Linden: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman, and that is a point that I will echo later in my speech. However, several hon. Members in Westminster Hall today have been recipients of emails from members of the Indian diaspora, the High Commission of India, and even a Member of the House of Lords, all getting their excuses in early and suggesting that the issues raised in today's debate are overblown or misplaced. Only this morning, a number of us received an email with the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards copied in, complaining that by taking part in this debate we were in breach of the MPs' code of conduct—which is frankly nonsense, and I expect the Commissioner will clarify that.

As a Scottish nationalist MP, I understand the optics of India's former colonial rulers being seen to lecture them on human rights and democracy; that is an irony that will not be lost on many people. However, as I said

earlier, foreign affairs is still very much a matter reserved to this Parliament, and it is therefore right that we comment, whether on India or on other parts of the world. I have no problem whatsoever with other Parliaments commenting on our situation as well.

In an email that we received from the noble Lord Ranger, we were reminded—if not rebuked—that India is the largest working democracy globally. I have to say, being reminded by an unelected peer about India being a democracy was certainly a novel experience, but Lord Ranger went on to say that

“a free trade agreement is on the cards in the not too distant future.”

He is right: it is precisely because India is the world's largest democracy, and a country with which the UK seeks a free trade agreement, that we are having this debate today and bringing into sharp focus violations of FORB and persecution of minority groups.

Religious persecution in India is a topic that I have been following for several years now, but I want to draw the attention of the House to a report from Open Doors UK, entitled “We're Indians Too”. That report provided a sobering analysis of the escalating human rights violations against religious minority communities in India. Although religion-based violence has existed for years, analysis of instances since 2014 demonstrate that Hindu extremists have created an environment of hate and intolerance towards India's religious minorities, primarily its Christian and Muslim communities. This in turn has led to an escalation of violence, social ostracism, property destruction, hate speech, disruption of peaceful non-Hindu religious activities, and false accusations of conversion activities. This has all been compounded yet further by the emergence of covid-19. We have heard alarming testimony of Christians from different states walking hundreds of miles to Madhya Pradesh state, being denied rations and informed that they would not have access to assistance. Indeed, the hon. Member for Strangford has said already that Muslims continue to be targeted as a perceived source of coronavirus and in many cases have been denied medical treatment as a result of that rhetoric.

Just as I have paid tribute to the work of Open Doors, I also want to thank Christian Solidarity Worldwide for all of its advocacy in respect of India. With your forbearance, Mr Robertson, I want to single out Joanne Moore who has been instrumental in briefing me on FORB issues over the years, specifically on but not limited to India. Joanne leaves CSW this month and will be enormously missed by all of us in the House who have appreciated her diligence, passion and expertise.

The South Asia state of minorities report of 2020, published just last month, paints a picture of spiting, oppressive and minority politics, the criminalisation of dissent and a deteriorating humanitarian situation within India. Mary Lawlor, UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, wrote, and I quote:

“In India, human rights defenders and religious minorities protesting discriminatory laws and practices have faced restrictions, violence, criminal defamation, detention and harassment.”

She went on to say:

“Other recent legislation limits freedom of opinion and expression, in the guise of preventing disharmony and disaffection.”

The situation is grave, and the UK has a role to play, I would argue. It is imperative that the Prime Minister's upcoming trip to India in the first half of 2021 is used

to send a signal that an enhanced trade partnership between the UK and India will not be signed until real change is realised. The British Government often comment that the UK has very constructive relations with India. It is precisely for that reason, Mr Robertson, that we should be acting as a critical friend when it comes to advocating for minority groups facing persecution. As with any negotiation there are trade-offs, but turning a blind eye to the persecution of religious minorities should not be one of them. It must be the case that that remains a priority for the British Government and this matter should be a red line in any future trade agreement.

Last night the House had an excellent debate on the concept of global Britain. I made it clear then and I do so again today that global Britain is not the SNP's project. We wish it well, but we do not wish Scotland to be a part of it for obvious reasons. However, an early first test for global Britain is in confronting the increasingly thuggish Modi regime, which has seen the oppression of religious minorities for far, far too long. The Minister knows this particular caucus of MPs well enough to understand that we always put party and constitutional politics aside to advocate for international freedom of religion and belief. In doing so, though, we will hold the Government's feet to the fire as the Prime Minister departs for India on his trip this year. The success of the trade mission will not just be measured in the size or scope of a free trade agreement. For me, the real measure will be whether or not Members of this House are still raising concerns about religious persecution later in the year, and I very much hope that we will not be.

10.38 am

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I would like to start by congratulating the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who I thought gave a passionate account of his views on this matter, along with other Members who secured this debate, including the hon. Members for Glasgow East (David Linden) and for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell). I would like to thank hon. Members on these Benches for their contributions. I thought my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) gave a particularly compelling and balanced account of the issues we are facing. Other contributors, not least my hon. Friends the Members for Bradford West (Naz Shah) and for Brent North (Barry Gardiner), made a number of very important points.

I want to stress that those on the Labour Front Bench stand firmly behind the rights of minorities to religious freedom, both in India and across the world. The Labour party's new foreign policy puts the rule of law, democracy and human rights at the very heart of our agenda, and we are absolutely clear that religious freedom is a critical right that must be universally upheld. However, the wider picture is that, according to recent research by the V-Dem Institute, for the first time since 2001 authoritarian regimes outnumber the world's democracies, and the number of such regimes is growing. That is why it is essential for democracies, of which India is of course the world's largest, to stand firm together in defence of universal human rights. We must lead by example in standing up for freedom of expression and freedom of religion. They are the cornerstones of the values that we

[Stephen Kinlock]

in the United Kingdom, and particularly the Labour party, hold dear. They should be the values that democrats across the world cherish.

We have consistently stood up for religious freedoms throughout Asia. We have called on the UK Government to take action against the Chinese Government for their persecution of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang by deploying Magnitsky sanctions against senior officials. We also consistently urge Ministers to defend the rights of minorities in Sri Lanka, and to act far more robustly on to the appalling treatment of the Rohingya people in Myanmar.

The Labour party has stood up for human rights in India, including by standing by Amnesty International in India, which was recently forced to discontinue its operations due to what it described as “persistent harassment” by the Indian Government. I also recently expressed our strong belief that the farmers protesting in India must have the right to peaceful protest, and that the Indian authorities must commit to upholding that right. Again, UK Ministers should be engaging far more actively and effectively with their counterparts in New Delhi to convey that message clearly.

The religious rights of minority groups in India are a hugely important issue. In the three years to June 2019, India’s national human rights commission registered 2,008 cases of minorities being harassed. Every one of those events is heartbreaking for those affected, who in some instances lost their lives, for their families and for all of us who wish to see India thrive as a nation.

Religious minorities constitute one fifth of India’s population. Articles 29 and 30 of the constitution protect the rights of those communities, including the right to use their own language and to form their own educational institutions. Article 15 prohibits discrimination on the grounds of religion, caste, sex or place of birth. In spite of those constitutional protections, however, in late 2019, the Indian Government’s Citizenship (Amendment) Act caused concern because it failed to state that it would offer a path to fast-track citizenship for Muslim immigrants, while explicitly committing to fast-tracking Hindus, Parsis, Jains, Buddhists, Sikhs and Christians from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

More recently, in late February 2020, New Delhi experienced terrible communal violence. The initial attacks were predominantly by members of the majority Hindu population against Muslim minority groups. The death toll reached 53. The majority of those who died were Muslims, but many Hindus also lost their lives and parts of north-east Delhi were put under lockdown. Every section of the population is profoundly damaged by such violence and strife.

Later in 2020, the persecution of Muslims continued as they were blamed for the spread of covid-19, as many hon. Members have mentioned. Hon. Members have also eloquently pointed out that Christians have suffered some persecution. According to Persecution Relief, between January 2016 and January 2020, there were 2,067 crimes inspired by religious intolerance against Christians in India.

India is the world’s largest democracy. As such, it can and should take its place as a leader in global affairs and a shaper of the global agenda. It is also a hugely diverse rainbow nation. As such, it has an opportunity to be one of the world’s most successful multi-ethnic,

multi-faith and multicultural societies. The vast majority of the Indian population, whatever their ethnicity or religion, are rightly proud of their country’s vibrant diversity and are committed to the principles of religious freedom that are important in any healthy democracy. The Indian Government have, of course, made some effort to support minorities through their multi-sector development programme, with the majority of the spend going on education. We are confident that those interventions will yield positive results.

In the light of the above, we call on Ministers to engage actively with their counterparts in New Delhi; to set out the role of the new special envoy on freedom of religion and belief, the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), and what she will do to encourage tolerance and inclusion; to explain the Government’s plan to compensate for the abolition of the Department for International Development, which did some outstanding work promoting religious freedoms across the globe; and to explain the decision to renege on the Government’s manifesto commitment to spend 0.7% of GDP on development. Can the Minister tell us which DFID programmes for freedom of religion and belief will survive these swingeing cuts?

It is vital that the Government take a serious and strategic approach to defending religious freedoms, and we look forward to the Minister’s answers on these vital issues.

10.45 am

The Minister for Asia (Nigel Adams): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing the debate and the role he plays on this issue in this House. I pay tribute to all his work as chair of the APPG for international freedom of religion or belief. I am grateful to all hon. Members for their contributions. My right hon. Friends the Members for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) and for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), and the hon. Members for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) and for Bradford West (Naz Shah) all made very thoughtful and insightful speeches. Like the hon. Member for Brent North, I am a little surprised to be here. Nevertheless, we are and have the opportunity to recognise and share the feeling in the House on these vital issues. Later in my speech, I will respond to the points hon. Members raised.

The UK is committed to defending freedom of religion or belief for all. It is one of our human rights priorities. Nobody should be excluded because of their religion or belief. Discrimination, as we all know, does terrible damage to societies. Importantly, it holds back economies. A country cannot fully develop or thrive while members of minority communities are oppressed. It is a core message of our diplomacy that communities are stronger, more stable and more prosperous when they embrace their diversity rather than fear it.

In November, my ministerial colleague who is responsible for human rights, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, underlined our commitment to freedom of religion or belief, speaking at the ministerial meeting to advance freedom of religion or belief and the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance Ministers’ forum. All hon. Members present will know that in 2019, the previous Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), commissioned the Bishop of Truro to undertake a review into the Government’s

support for persecuted Christians. I want to confirm yet again that this Government remain fully committed to implementing all the Bishop's recommendation and promoting freedom of religion or belief for all.

I am delighted, as I am sure everyone here will be, that we have confirmed that my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) will continue that implementation, as the Prime Minister's new special envoy for freedom of religion or belief. The hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) was absolutely right to raise that point, as well as the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), who, in a previous debate, pushed on when that appointment would be made. I am thrilled that it was made before the Christmas break. I am sure that my hon. Friend will do a fantastic job.

Those of us who have had the pleasure of visiting India know that it is a magnificent country. It is one of the most religiously diverse countries in the world. It boasts over 20 official languages, over 1,500 registered dialects—it is very similar to Yorkshire in that regard—and a rich tapestry of religious minorities, alongside its sizeable Hindu majority. It is also the birthplace of the other great religions of Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. Most notably in the context of this debate, it is also home to the world's third largest Muslim population—over 195 million people—and approximately 28 million Christians.

Shortly after partition, India's first Prime Minister, Nehru, said:

“Whatever our religion or creed, we are all one people.”

This is the foundation stone of India. Regardless of religious differences, all citizens can consider themselves Indians.

Indians are rightly proud of their history of inclusive government, and their secular constitution, which hon. Members have referred to. This guarantees citizens equality before the law. We are proud of our diversity and religious pluralism in the UK, and those are shared values, central to the governance of both our countries. They lie at the heart of our partnership, which is further strengthened by the UK's 1.5 million-strong Indian diaspora—the living bridge between us.

However, as hon. Members have noted, India faces challenges in enforcing its constitutional protections for freedom of religion or belief. The situation for religious minorities across India varies depending on where they live, their socioeconomic background and how their numbers compare to other communities. Some have suggested that the UK turns a blind eye to these challenges, because we do not want to criticise an important partner. I can assure the House that this is not the case. On the contrary, thanks to our close relationship, we are able to discuss the most difficult issues with the Government of India and make clear our concerns, as they do with us, and as one would expect from close partners and friends.

David Linden: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way and have a huge amount of respect for him, but can he put on record that when the Prime Minister sits down with Prime Minister Modi, he will raise this with him in person?

Nigel Adams: Absolutely. The hon. Member is right to raise this. There is a real opportunity, when that trip goes ahead, not just to talk about what is incredibly

important in our trading relationship with India, but to put on the table our concerns around these issues. In that vein, I can confirm that during the Foreign Secretary's visit to India in December, he raised a number of these human rights issues with his Indian counterpart, including the situation in Kashmir and our concern around many consular cases.

Most recently, our acting high commissioner in New Delhi discussed the UK's parliamentary interest in minorities in India with officials from India's Ministry of External Affairs on 4 January. Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office officials here in London discussed the situation for India's religious minorities with the Indian high commissioner on 29 December. Our Minister responsible for human rights and our relations with India, Lord Ahmad, speaks regularly to his opposite number in the Ministry of External Affairs in New Delhi and with the Indian high commissioner here in the UK. Where we have concerns, he raises them directly with the Indian authorities.

Over the last three years, our high commission has worked with local non-governmental organisations to bring together hundreds of young people of diverse faiths in three cities in India to work together on social action projects in their local communities, thereby promoting a culture of interfaith dialogue. Our diplomatic network across India also regularly meets religious representatives from all faiths to understand their perspectives. We use important milestones such as Inter Faith Week to reach out to these communities. In May, our high commission hosted a virtual Iftar, engaging over 100 Muslim and other faith and civil society contacts across India. There was positive media coverage, reaching around 7 million people.

In September, our high commission hosted a virtual roundtable with faith leaders from the Hindu, Sikh, Muslim and Christian communities to understand how faith groups in India have responded to the pandemic, to celebrate their important contribution to supporting local communities, and to promote joint working between faith leaders. This year, our high commission will support an interfaith leadership programme for a cohort of emerging Indian faith leaders, including Christians and Muslims. Hopefully, this will create an opportunity for: UK-India interfaith dialogue on tackling shared global challenges such as climate change; exchanging expertise on leading modern, inclusive faith communities; and promoting values of tolerance and multiculturalism.

The hon. Member for Strangford raised the case of Father Stan Swamy. Human rights defenders make an essential contribution to the promotion of the rights of their fellow citizens. We acknowledge that they face growing threats, and the UK works with many international partners to support them through our networks of high commissions and embassies. We have directly raised the case of Father Stan Swamy with the Indian authorities, most recently on 12 November. We will continue to monitor such cases and raise them directly with Ministers where appropriate.

With regard to the Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2019, Lord Ahmad has previously raised our concerns about the impact of recent legislative and judicial measures on India's minorities directly with Ministers. We have not yet received any confirmation from the Government of India on whether an India-wide national register of

[Nigel Adams]

citizens will be implemented. We keenly await details of any next steps that they take following the NRC in Assam.

Naz Shah: Will the Minister give way?

Nigel Adams: I am conscious that I have to give the hon. Member for Strangford a couple of minutes at the end of the debate, so if the hon. Lady does not mind, I need to conclude.

I end by saying that we look to the Government of India to address these concerns and protect the rights of people of all religions. That is in keeping with India's constitution and a proud and inclusive tradition. Our high commission in New Delhi and our network of deputy high commissioners across India will continue to monitor the situation closely. Where we have concerns, we do not hesitate to raise them directly with the Indian authorities.

10.57 am

Jim Shannon: I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their heartfelt contributions, some of which I would not be entirely supportive of, but all were contributions in the right sense of the word, which is the important thing.

It was said that every community needs to be protected; that is so important. Our role in this House and in this debate is to speak up for those who have no voice. We are speaking up for the 1.9 million Rohingya Muslims who have no citizen rights, and for the 1.3 billion citizens in India living under new anti-conversion laws. We speak up on behalf of the Christians, the Muslims, the Shi'as, the Sikhs, and all people who do not conform or do not follow the Hindu religion.

I thank the Minister for his response. He has confirmed what we all wanted to hear: the Government raise the issues with India whenever the opportunity arises. In replying to the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), the Minister gave the answer that we hoped for, and it was said in a constructive and positive way. The right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) and the hon. Member for Glasgow East will know that I like to end these debates with a scriptural text. This is from Peter 5, verses 7 to 10.

“Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you...the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore

and

“strengthen you.”

Today, this House, in Westminster Hall, has spoken up for those who have no voice, and for those who have no one to speak for them. We look forward to the Government and the Minister doing just that for each and every one of us.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of persecution of Muslims, Christians and minority groups in India.

Domestic Tourism

11.1 am

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered domestic tourism.

I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I rise to speak as the chairman of the all-party parliamentary group for hospitality and tourism and the MP for St Austell and Newquay, which is the constituency that many recognise as being the most reliant on tourism and hospitality in the country. It is estimated that more than 50% of jobs in the town of Newquay are directly reliant on the tourism industry. In 2018, St Austell and Newquay had more overnight stays than any other constituency in the country, at just under 5 million.

Across Cornwall as a whole, tourism represents almost 25% of our economy. It is said that one in three households relies on tourism for at least part of its income. There is no doubt that nationally—domestic tourism contributes almost £20 billion to our economy—and in Cornwall, we are very much reliant on the tourism industry for a large part of our economy.

There is no doubt that the tourism sector has been one of the most adversely impacted over the past year as a result of the global pandemic that we are all grappling with. I thank all businesses in the sector that have worked incredibly hard over the past year to adapt, innovate, deal with the challenges they have been facing, and respond positively. Many have helped to support their communities in any number of ways, whether by providing housing for those who are homeless or by providing food for those who have needed it. Some hotels have provided accommodation for people being discharged from hospital. In any number of ways, the sector has helped our country get through the pandemic over the past 10 months or so. It is right that we recognise that and thank it for all it has done. The positive way that those businesses have responded is a great credit to them.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): In my constituency of Strangford, and particularly in my council area of Ards and North Down, domestic tourism is the key to the council's economic growth for the future and the jobs that can be created. It spins off to bed and breakfasts, wedding venues, and the tourist attractions at Strangford lough. I am very fortunate to live at the very edge of Strangford lough, so I know the beauty of it. I challenge the hon. Gentleman to say whose constituency is the most beautiful. I will just say this: domestic tourism is so important to my area, and to the whole United Kingdom. I support his debate, and I am looking for a really good answer from the Minister.

Steve Double: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. No one could ever doubt his enthusiasm for representing his constituency in many ways. He makes some great points about the reliance of his part of the world on tourism; Cornwall has that same reliance. One of the key things about our tourism industry is that it supports many of the poorest and most deprived parts of our country. Many of our coastal areas, which struggle economically in many ways, rely heavily on tourism. I will come back to that later in the debate.

I place on the record my thanks to the Minister. I am delighted that he is here to respond, because he has been incredibly accessible and responsive over the last year in his role as Minister with responsibility for tourism. He came to Cornwall in the summer; it was great to see him. Businesses there were very grateful, and spoke about how highly he is regarded in the sector for the way that he has engaged with and been accessible to businesses up and down the country.

The Government have provided unprecedented support to businesses in the tourism and hospitality sectors through grants, the furlough scheme, the VAT cut, which was hugely welcome for the sector, the eat out to help out scheme and Government-backed loans. Those schemes have all been absolutely essential in helping businesses to get through the pandemic, and have been warmly welcomed by businesses. We should acknowledge the recent announcement of a further round of Treasury grants. That is absolutely crucial to ensure that businesses get through the current lockdown.

The Minister will be aware that many businesses still face huge challenges despite all the support that the Government have provided. They face what is now commonly called the “three-winter scenario”: businesses that rely on seasonal tourism did not make as much money as usual in last year’s summer season, and now face another very difficult winter. It is absolutely essential that the Government do everything that they can to ensure that all viable businesses survive this period. After we have put so much support into those businesses, it would be a tragedy to see them fail, just as we are hoping that our country can return to some sort of normality and that the tourism sector can reopen.

It is absolutely essential that we do all that we can to ensure that businesses get through this period. I know that many of these things are not the Minister’s responsibility, but I urge him to work with the Treasury to look at what further support we can provide.

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): Domestic tourism is absolutely vital. In Keighley and Ilkley in my constituency, we have a huge number of fantastic businesses in the self-catered accommodation sector, which is vital in supporting tourism, such as Upwood Park in the Worth valley and Olicana Park in Addingham. Does my hon. Friend agree that a little extra support should be given to the self-catered accommodation sector?

Steve Double: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention. I was about to make that point: despite all the support that the Government have provided, parts of the sector, such as self-catering, events and weddings, have fallen through the gaps, and it is important that we look at what we can do for them.

The wedding industry is absolutely crucial to many hotels and other attractions in the tourism sector, because it provides good income outside the peak season—they have lost all that income in the last year. We also need to bear in mind that a wedding cannot normally be planned in just a few days. Once we are able to reopen the sector, it will still be weeks and months before those businesses’ incomes are built back up, as people are not booking weddings at the moment because of the uncertainty; they will be booking them in many months’ time. Businesses will not open their doors and suddenly see the revenue flow back in overnight. It is important that we look at what we can do for some of those sectors.

I also place on the record the impact that some of the very sudden changes have had on the sector. In Cornwall, we went from tier 2 to tier 3 on 30 December. Although I absolutely understand and support the need to take that decision to protect public health, it had a huge impact for many hotels—which were expecting to be booked up for new year’s eve and had stocked their fridges and bars for that—to suddenly find, with just a few hours’ notice, that they would have to shut. The impact was not just in terms of the lost revenue, but the wasted stock they had already purchased and were then unable to sell on. I am not sure that the impact of those sudden changes has always been reflected in the support that the Government have made available.

If grants are provided to retailers which perhaps sell clothes, then in six or eight weeks’ time, when they may be able to reopen, those clothes will still be there to sell. Restaurants or hotels that have stocked their fridges and must then dispose of all that stock are in a very different position from that of a retail outlet, but the grants that are given are pretty much the same; that difference has not always been reflected.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman is right about the impact on the hospitality sector, particularly on the restaurants and cafés that were preparing for the new year. Does he accept that there is not only a financial loss for all the preparations they have done, but a psychological disadvantage? Sometimes the ups and downs—the topsy-turvy way that things are happening—have an effect upon them mentally.

Steve Double: The hon. Gentleman is right that the impact of this for businesses is not just financial—although how important that is—but emotional and mental. However, hope is on the horizon with the roll-out of the vaccine. I place on record my thanks to all those who are working so hard to get this vaccine into the arms of people up and down the country. We can now see light at the end of the tunnel. We know that this pandemic will come to an end in the coming months.

It is vital that we ensure that all those businesses in the tourism sector can not only reopen, but be in a position to make the most of the coming months, because there is huge pent-up demand for holidays and for days and nights out. It is not just about the economic recovery; it is about the social, emotional and mental recovery of our country as well—being able to do all those things that we have missed for the last year.

The tourism sector will be vital in helping our country achieve that because, as much as we want to see the travel industry also recovering, and people taking overseas holidays, the reality is that it will probably be some time before that happens. UK residents may be nervous of booking overseas trips. I also think it will take a while for that part of the industry to recover, so the opportunity for staycation holidays next summer will be huge. It is very important that our businesses can make the most of that.

The challenge that many of those businesses are facing is working capital. Although they may be able to open, unless they have the working capital to invest, buy stock, take on staff and make themselves ready to take advantage of the coming months, they will not be able to lead our recovery in the way we would like. There are a few things that it will be very important for us to look

[Steve Double]

at doing to ensure that those businesses can open their doors and be in a place to make the most of the coming months.

First, we should look to extend the business rates holiday, which has been hugely welcome. If we expect those businesses to start to pay full business rates in April, just as they will possibly be able to start to reopen, it will put a huge strain on their cash flow and their working capital. There is a very good case to be made for extending the business rates holiday for the next year, or at least another six months, to enable those businesses to build up some working capital.

The VAT cut has also been hugely welcomed by the sector. Again, if we expect businesses to start paying VAT just as they are looking to reopen, it will limit their ability to make the most of the months ahead. I would like to see VAT on tourism and hospitality cut permanently, but at the very least there is a case for extending the VAT cut for another six months to enable those businesses to build up the working capital they will need to make the most of the opportunities this year.

Thirdly, we should looking at extending the repayment terms for the loans that the Government have backed. Many business people took them out months ago, in May or June, and they will have to start repaying them just when they need that cash to invest in enabling their businesses to reopen.

We need to look at extending those three things to ensure that businesses do not just survive through the coming weeks, but are then able to make the very most of the opportunity that the coming months will present to them. As we do so, there is an opportunity to use this moment; I use the term advisedly, because one of the Labour Front-Bench team used it in a slightly different way, but we should not waste this crisis.

This crisis has brought the tourism and hospitality industry more into focus. People are much more aware of its importance in our country, and that cannot be a bad thing. We need to look at what we can do to make the most of the recovery from this crisis, so that we have a thriving tourism industry—particularly domestic tourism—for many years to come.

There are a few things we should look at doing. First, I would like to see us make the very most of the tourism sector deal; it is very welcome, but it can be beefed up. There is more that can be done, and maybe as part of that deal we need to look at some sort of tourism recovery fund to invest in the sector. We need to come forward with the tourism zones, and I would like to make the case to the Minister that Cornwall, or at least the south-west, should be one of the first areas to get that recognition and the support that goes with it.

Secondly, we need to better market UK tourism, both internationally and within the UK market. There is a case for more support to invest in destination marketing organisations; they have had a really tough time, but they will be absolutely crucial to the future of the sector.

Thirdly, we must ensure that the sector has the workforce it needs; with our ending of the free movement of people, which I absolutely agree with and accept, we need to promote jobs within the sector as good career opportunities. I would make the case for bringing forward

the T-level in catering and hospitality as soon as possible, to ensure that the sector has staff with the skills that they will need.

To sum up, there is no doubt that our domestic tourism industry has had a tough time and been hugely affected over the past year, but it is in a good position, with Government support, to recover quickly and to play a crucial role in helping our nation recover from this pandemic. I also believe it will be absolutely essential to the Government's achieving their ambitions for their levelling-up agenda that our tourism sector recovers as quickly as possible. I ask the Government, through the Minister, to look again at what we can do to continue to support the sector through the coming months, to ensure that it is in the best possible place to lead our recovery.

11.17 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) on securing this debate. I know he works tirelessly on behalf of the tourism industry in Cornwall and, in his APPG role, of tourism right across the country, as well as of the broader hospitality sector, which was the subject of a debate here in Westminster Hall only yesterday, which he also participated in. I also thank other hon. Members who have contributed today; they are all consistent advocates for the tourism and hospitality industry, and I have had conversations with many of them previously.

Indeed, as my hon. Friend said, because of the advocacy for the sector in this place by the hon. Members who are present today and many more, the voice of the tourism sector has never been stronger in Parliament. That can only be a good thing, because today's debate demonstrates the vital importance of the tourism industry to the UK economy and underlines just how strongly it is missed in these stretches of enforced covid closures.

I will start by echoing the contributions made by hon. Members about the economic contribution of the domestic tourism industry, and then talk in more general terms about what the Government are doing to support the sector. The tourism industry contributes well over £70 billion to the UK economy, and prior to this pandemic it employed 1.6 million people directly and more than 3 million—perhaps as many as 4 million—people indirectly.

In 2019, 41 million visitors travelled to the UK from overseas, creating many business opportunities and of course generating many jobs in every corner of the country in the process. And domestically, British residents took 99 million trips in England for leisure or business purposes, spending the best part of £20 billion. Indeed, buoyed by the positive momentum of previous years and Government interventions, including the tourism sector deal, the Discover England fund and other initiatives, we were looking forward to having a really booming domestic tourism industry as we entered 2020, but of course covid had different plans.

None the less, the Government acted quickly, straightaway from March last year onwards, and I appreciate the recognition of the Government interventions that has been expressed today. That action included introducing a variety of measures that particularly helped the sector; even though many of them were all-economy measures, they were particularly adopted by the tourism

sector. They included the furlough scheme, the self-employed support scheme and a variety of loan schemes. Of course, on top of that there were the retail, hospitality and leisure grants, and the business rates holidays.

When the sector did open in July, we helped it further with a variety of initiatives, including tourism promotion campaigns and, of course, the VAT cut, as has been mentioned. And in the spirit of the “Enjoy Summer Safely” and the “Escape the Everyday” campaigns, I was delighted to be able to visit my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay in his constituency. In fact, I managed to get around all six constituencies in Cornwall, and I very much appreciated hearing from a number of local stakeholders and businesses who were very clear, honest and frank about what they needed; I always appreciate such communication from the sector. I visited some really iconic and truly global destinations, such as the Eden Project. Also, alongside all the marketing work, VisitBritain introduced a “We’re Good To Go” standard last year and over 41,000 businesses signed up for it, showcasing the hard work that venues put into reopening in a secure way.

However, although the summer may have gone well for some—I understand that particularly in the south-west there were good average daily rates and good occupancy rates—that was by no means consistent across the board. In particular, our city centres and other urban areas are still struggling with incredibly low occupancy rates.

So, covid forced us to adapt our approach in the late summer and autumn of last year, but unfortunately we had to introduce more restrictions later in the autumn. I know that those restrictions, which hampered domestic tourism considerably, have placed further strain on businesses.

However, the Government acted, and will continue to act, to help to mitigate those pressures. In response to November’s national lockdown and the local measures that were introduced at that time, the Chancellor provided further support for businesses and individuals, including extending various Government-backed loans, the furlough scheme and the self-employed scheme, and in particular the Government introduced new local restriction grants.

In light of the new national restrictions, last week the Chancellor announced one-off top-up grants for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses, which are worth up to £9,000 per property, to help businesses through to the spring, plus a further £594 million discretionary fund to support other impacted businesses. My hon. Friend mentioned those entities, businesses and sub-sectors that have perhaps fallen through the cracks. I encourage all of them to apply for these discretionary funds. There was an existing discretionary grant fund, which has been topped up recently. I also encourage—indeed, I implore—local authorities to be particularly sympathetic to those sub-sectors within the hospitality, leisure and tourism sectors that hitherto have not been able to access such grants. Supporting them is precisely what these grants are for.

Steve Double: I welcome the fact that the Minister has made that point, because there has been a concern that sometimes councils have been too rigid in using their discretion regarding these discretionary grants, and many businesses have not been able to access them. So, I join him in encouraging local authorities across

the country to be flexible and to use the discretion that the Treasury has given them in applying those grants, to ensure that they are accessible to the businesses that really need them.

Nigel Huddleston: Absolutely—I agree with my hon. Friend. As I say, the very clear message from myself and from this Chamber today to those local authorities is, “Please be very generous with those grants for those sectors that have not been able to access support.”

Of course, the details of the latest grant schemes will come out very shortly. There will be swathes of the hospitality, leisure and tourism sectors that will be clearly identified specifically for those grants; as I have said, they are for retail, hospitality and leisure. Large swathes should be covered. However, regarding those sectors and sub-sectors that are not covered already, I really hope that they will now be covered. I would like to see as many parts of the country covering those sectors as possible.

With the vaccination campaign under way, the Government will stand beside tourism through the pandemic’s finishing straight. Of course, we all know that now is the time to listen to the sector’s priorities for recovery, and to incorporate them into our thinking. I place on the record my deep thanks for the many stakeholders who have contributed, through the Tourism Industry Council and many others, and through their MPs, to help us develop the recovery plan for the sector.

In the short term, that means that we will allow businesses to reopen as soon as possible. We also want to ensure that where businesses are open, they can do so as profitably as possible, which also means stimulating consumer demand through marketing campaigns and removing pandemic-related barriers on travel as soon as it is safe to do so. My hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay mentioned the important role of marketing both domestically and for inbound tourism, and that is exactly what we will be doing.

Further down the line, it is about making sure that we build back better. While we must first focus on assisting businesses through the immediate period, we have not lost sight of our long-term ambitions for the sector. We want to future-proof the tourism sector and are determined to play our part in developing a more sustainable, innovative and data-driven tourism industry. We will continue to engage with tourism stakeholders, including the all-important destination management organisations, which my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay Gentleman also mentioned; they play such an important role.

As we look forward to how we can effectively support the sector through covid and beyond, we will continue to develop the tourism recovery plan, which I mentioned, and we will be working across Government Departments in that. Of course, my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay knows from yesterday’s debate that I work very closely with the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), and the Department for Business, who oversee the pubs, bars and restaurants side of the hospitality sector. It is a good thing that we have multiple Ministers advocating this sector; it all helps in the discussions that we have with the Treasury, which, I am sure, is listening to today’s debate.

[Nigel Huddleston]

On that line, my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay and others have voiced certain requests, for which I certainly have a lot of sympathy. With the VAT proposals, of course, I understand the need there—we are in discussions with the Treasury, which has already extended the VAT scheme once. With the loan schemes, changes have already taken place. I think the fact that the loan schemes have changed once, and the fact that the VAT scheme has already been extended, show that the Treasury is listening, and that is why debates such as today's are always so useful.

I can assure my hon. Friend that the Treasury is listening; we are in constant dialogue and I appreciate all the lobbying work that the sector is doing, putting forward strong evidence to argue the case as well, which is very much appreciated. The fact that the sector has been so open with providing information and data in realtime has really helped to inform the Government's decision making over the last few months as we have been dealing with the covid crisis. In fact, it has been extremely open, often giving information that otherwise would perhaps be very confidential and sensitive, and we really appreciate that openness. It helps us to make realtime decisions.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay also mentioned the importance of the longer-term programme for the issues of seasonality, the perennial issue of productivity and, indeed, concerns about the perception of the industry, which I know we all fight against. This industry is a fantastic sector. I have worked in it; he has worked in it for a long time. There are very fulfilling careers in this sector. We need to ensure that it is promoted and respected in the way that it should be.

I can assure hon. Members that the Government overall are listening. I believe the voice of the sector has never been louder and stronger, and I absolutely commit to continuing to work with all stakeholders and all colleagues to make sure that we further support our domestic tourism industry and put it on the pedestal that it deserves.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.

Early Years Settings: Covid-19

[MR LAURENCE ROBERTSON *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the effect of the covid-19 outbreak on early years settings.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I would like to start by saying a huge thank you, if I may, to the early years leaders, the staff and the childminders up and down the country who have kept rising to all the challenges thrown at them during the pandemic over the last year, and kept putting the needs of our children first. They are often unsung heroes, putting their lives at risk many times to educate and care for our children, and I am delighted to be able to have this debate today to right the wrongs for those who have felt forgotten.

Far too often during the pandemic, the early years sector has felt like an afterthought, yet all the evidence shows that pre-school education is absolutely vital to a child achieving their potential. Going into school already months behind is too often a guide to underachievement later. Early years settings are essential and provide long-term benefits for the economy and society. They help to close the attainment gap between children from low-income families and their more advantaged peers, and remove barriers to employment, particularly for women, who are still disproportionately responsible for unpaid care. I hope that this debate will be an opportunity to correct the lack of support for early years settings throughout the pandemic, to look their representatives in the face, and to address and gain parity for early years with other education sectors.

Two local nursery headteachers got in touch with me this morning. I thank the Minister for meeting some of my local nursery headteachers during last year's lockdown, because it is important to talk to headteachers. One of them said to me: "We are proud to be open, but we need support and clearly thought-out guidance focused on the early years. We are looking after their children, but who is looking after the staff?" Another said: "We really feel like a forgotten sector, and if primary schools in the UK and nurseries in Scotland are only open for key workers, why not nursery settings in England and Wales?"

Many questions are being asked today, and they are hoping for answers. I pay tribute to the Early Years Alliance, to the Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years, and the National Education Union for championing the sector. This is needed now, more than ever.

Early years leaders in my constituency have two major concerns that I will focus on today: safety and funding. First, there is a huge concern from early years staff about the safety of being open at the moment. Will the Government publish the evidence base for nurseries being open, and will they commit to reviewing the transmission rates regularly and revise this decision, if necessary?

Early years staff feel that they are putting their lives in danger by coming into school, and that they are putting their mental and physical health at risk. There is no social distancing in nurseries, and nor should there

be. One local headteacher said to me: “I have been an early years professional for over 30 years, but today is the first time I go to work fearing for the safety of my staff, myself and that of my family.” Another constituent said to me: “I feel strongly that nurseries should only be providing childcare to children whose parents cannot work from home, or for key workers’ children and vulnerable children, for as long as schools stay closed.” That is a question being asked by parents and by staff across the country.

Last week, the Prime Minister conceded that, especially regarding the new variant of covid, schools are vectors for transmission. I have asked about early years settings in the briefings we have had with health experts and Ministers, and I understand that the data show that transmission rates reduce in line with age. However, with transmission rates so high at the moment—one in 20 people have covid in some parts of London—the transmission rates will still be high in nurseries.

Early years staff simply do not understand why it is so important that primary schools, right down to reception, have had to close because of community transmission, but not early years. The Secretary of State said in one briefing last week that nurseries are open because they are businesses. Is that the real reason? We really need to know. Staff are worried and parents are confused, and this undermines public confidence in decisions and public health messaging. The Government need to provide answers.

That is safety, and now for finances: the UK’s childcare sector has been crushed financially by covid-19. There was already a £660 million shortfall in early years funding before the pandemic, and that has been worsened by the inadequate and patchy Government support throughout lockdown closures. The Institute for Fiscal Studies calculates that childcare settings received £4 in income for every £5 spent during the last lockdown. They are running at a significant loss. The financial issues faced by early years settings will result in closures, and they are a real risk to the diversity of early years settings, which we all value: parents value it, and children see the benefit of it across the country. Will that diversity still be there at the end of the pandemic?

Headteachers have said to me that this is currently about the survival of the fittest—those with the most accommodating landlord, those with councils paying the free entitlement funding, and any number of other factors—instead of survival based on the needs of and the best places for our children. The decision to allocate funding from this month onwards on the basis of current occupancy levels rather than pre-covid occupancy levels is incredibly misguided, and will spell financial ruin for thousands of nurseries. Costs such as rent, insurance and salaries are fixed for many nurseries, yet attendance is down because of illness, concerns about going in, being told to stay at home, lower enrolment for this year, and parents having reduced incomes themselves. The only financial support was the furlough payments received by many nurseries. I am sure that support will be lauded by the Minister later, but those furlough payments did not cover nurseries’ running costs, which stayed fixed.

I return to the issue of free entitlement funding from councils, which must be addressed. Councils receive the free entitlement funding from Government, but only some of them pass it on to the nurseries. Some do so on

the basis of the number of children currently present. Schools, however, get funded on the basis not of the numbers present, but of the numbers enrolled at the school. That should be the same for nurseries. Many nurseries were not eligible for a small business grant, as most do not pay business rates. Maintained nurseries do pay business rates but were not allowed to apply for the business rates holiday. There were lots of anomalies in nursery funding, and there is still time to fix them.

Another nursery head pointed out to me this week that no financial support has been offered when settings have had to close for up to 10 days because of a positive test, and there was no financial support for cover staff. That is the one thing that could break them financially, as one teacher who contacted me pointed out. Maintained nurseries should be able to access the schools covid catch-up fund, but they are not able to do so, even though catch-up will be crucial to the life chances of those in early years. Will that be addressed? There are only 389 maintained nursery schools left in the UK, and only one in my constituency, Eastwood Day Nursery, which is outstanding and an essential part of local education provision.

Maintained nurseries were in major financial crisis before covid, and they now have increased costs for personal protective equipment and staffing, for which they have been unable to claim. They pay business rates, as I have said, but were not allowed to claim for the business rates holiday, and it has now emerged that they cannot claim from the covid catch-up fund. The headteacher at Eastwood Day Nursery said: “The quality of what we can offer is in real jeopardy if our funding is reduced. We are fearful that the much-needed service we provide to the children of a very deprived community is at great risk if we do not have the secure funding to continue our work. Nurseries will simply not be able to continue at the current rates. Closures of early years settings across the country will deepen both financial and educational inequalities, while slowing the recovery from the pandemic.

I have several urgent questions for the Minister and would be grateful if she could answer them in her response. My first question is on safety: will the Department for Education publish the evidence base for the decision to keep nurseries open? Will that be reviewed regularly and will consideration be given to closing nurseries during this lockdown, for the safety of staff and to stop the spread of the virus in our community? Any closures must come with support for families, including a legal right to flexible furlough for childcare reasons, and not a cut in universal credit. Will the Government provide funding for PPE for early years settings? Will the Minister ensure that early years settings have priority for lateral flow testing, ideally delivered to the early years settings and then picked up, and that all early years staff and childminders are prioritised to receive the vaccine as soon as possible?

Will serious consideration be given to prioritising education funding for early years settings? Issues that need to be addressed include their ability to claim for PPE expenditure and the covid catch-up fund, and the fact that they are penalised for pupils’ absence and do not receive free entitlement funding. Much more clarity of funding is needed, as different councils make different decisions—it is a postcode lottery. Will the Minister confirm whether nurseries will receive funding to cover

[Fleur Anderson]

support when teachers have to self-isolate, or will the whole nursery have to close? Will the business rates holiday be applied to maintained nursery schools? Will the Minister work with her colleagues in the Treasury to bring forward a new package of financial support for private and maintained early years settings, to look at provision across the country and make sure that the sector is secure enough to be able to build back?

I conclude with a quote from the headteacher of a nursery in my constituency in Putney: “But who are we, the forgotten educators who ensure that people can continue to work knowing their precious children will be cared for and educated safely? We are in trouble. We need your help. We have been given no support for PPE or to implement extra hygienic measures. Our staff are putting themselves at risk every day, and we do it willingly. We do it because we are early years professionals and we care. But please, we need help. If early years settings go bankrupt because of lack of Government support, who will look after our children—your children—in the future?”

My message to the Minister is simple: the early years sector desperately needs her help. I urge her to listen and to act.

2.41 pm

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) on securing and introducing this debate. As chair of the all-party group on childcare and early education, I want to make a brief contribution. I hope the hon. Lady will join the group. We look forward to having her as speaker at our next meeting. She will be very welcome.

On occupancy and demand for places, demand is, on average, 21% lower than it was in 2019. The Government had been basing early entitlement funding on pre-covid attendance rates, but it was announced just before Christmas that this would stop in the spring term. New guidance has not yet been issued on whether councils should continue to fund places for children not currently attending. That said, I was pleased to learn that Hampshire, my own county, said last week that it will guarantee funding until half term—which is good but obviously very short-term—whether or not parents decide to keep their children at home due to the pandemic.

More generally, I want to place on record a survey carried out in November by the excellent Early Years Alliance, which found that 56% of providers said that basing fees on current occupancy would have a negative or very negative impact on them. Of those, 45% said they did not think they would be able to remain viable for more than six months as things stand. This means that the decision to remove this support could result in some big closures by late spring. It is that urgent, remembering, as we do, that early years settings are open and allowing parents to go to work.

Turning to testing and vaccinations, it is hugely welcome, as the hon. Lady said, that early years staff will be offered asymptomatic testing. When she closes the debate, will the Minister provide some detail on when and how that will be accessible, what support and training practitioners will be offered with administering the tests; and, of course, how associated costs will be covered?

Some practitioners have been offered vaccinations by their local hospital. Some, obviously, will come within the first four groups, but that is not the case for all. Early years practitioners are bravely continuing to come into work, despite the current prevalence of the virus in society. In my opinion, they, along with other educators and critical workers, should be offered the vaccine as a priority in phase 2 of the roll-out. I made that point in this very Chamber yesterday, so I will not labour it again.

Thirdly, on self-isolation and covid in early years settings, we know it is a constant juggle for settings to remain open due to the number of staff self-isolating. Nurseries have had to form closed bubbles of specific staff and children, meaning that if there is a positive test in one bubble, the other children need to isolate. That obviously has an impact on parents, particularly critical workers, so I would argue that offering routine testing for the early education sector and prioritising it for the vaccine roll-out is key.

Furthermore, having a lot of staff self-isolating and testing positive also means that practitioners are struggling to maintain the important staff ratios. I have heard many nursery owners say that they are not clear whether, if they had to close due to a lack of available staff, they would lose their entitlement funding. They will typically also lose parent fees in this situation, which means that paying staff and keeping up with other costs, such as rent and utilities, becomes a real challenge.

It is important to note that for childminders, who are so often overlooked in this whole early years debate—I declare my interest, because I am married to one—a positive test will almost always mean the temporary closure of the entire business, which will have an impact on all those who rely on that childminder.

It would remiss of me not to mention the pre-existing funding challenges, which have already been touched on. They never went away and were, of course, the subject of the debate I led in this place last month. The early education sector was, I continue to argue, experiencing market failure long before the pandemic. Funding levels have not covered the cost of provision for many years. Ceeda, an excellent independent research company, has shown that even if occupancy levels were exactly the same now as they were in spring 2019, some 77% of childcare providers would still be coping with a shortfall of £2 per hour for every funded two-year-old, and 90p per hour for every funded three and four-year-old. That drag becomes a problem, and it is now a real problem.

I thank the Minister for the 1.2% increase in funding rates due to come into effect in April. However, in practice and at best, it equates to just 6p or 8p an hour per child for childcare providers across England—at a time when we should remember that the national living wage is due to increase by 2.2%.

In closing, I still believe we need to commission an independent, meaningful review of early years policy and funding, to ensure that the gap between the costs of delivering early education and the rate paid per hour per child to providers is closed and eventually eliminated. If we do not do that, we are going to lose a lot of provision, which would serve nobody and would be the opposite of levelling up.

Finally, I want to say how sad it is that sittings in Westminster Hall will not continue after today if the motion tonight goes ahead. As a former Minister who

has spent many hours sitting in this Chamber and responding to debates, I believe that good scrutiny leads to good policy and good government, and without it, we are all worse off.

2.47 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Robertson. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) on securing the debate and making an excellent opening speech. Although she has been here quite a short time, she is becoming an exceedingly accomplished parliamentarian.

“Underfunded for years, future funding cut, and now expected to work at a time where the new variant is more transmissible, when most others are instructed to stay home. The decisions this Government is making will be the nail in the coffin for many providers. There will be a shortage of childcare space when society returns to more normal times.” Those are not my words; they were sent to me by a manager of an early years setting in my constituency. They deserve better.

On Saturday, I sent out a short survey asking for childcare providers, staff and parents to respond in advance of this debate—although I did not know at that time that I would be chosen to speak, and certainly not quite so high up on the call list. Just before the start of this debate, we had 748 responses. I would be happy to pass them on to the Minister, because I can only use a small selection in the debate today.

It is not before time that we discuss early years settings in this place. Since the start of the pandemic, while the subject of schools has rightly been discussed and debated widely, early years settings have been largely ignored by the media and neglected by the Government. During the first lockdown, nurseries and providers wrote to me. They were anxious about the future, stuck with very little Government support and dependent on the continued support of parents. The Early Years Alliance warned in October that as many one in six settings could close as a direct result of the lack of support given during the crisis.

Nurseries in my city and across the country relied financially on parents continuing to pay their fees, often at significant cost, while their children remained at home.

A little over a week ago, early years settings were again plunged into crisis. Having opened up all the schools on Monday, the Prime Minister then reversed that decision on television, closing all the schools from Tuesday morning. However, he asked all the early years settings to remain open. Early years staff in my constituency were and still are very concerned that their safety is deemed to be less important than that of their counterparts in primary and secondary schools.

Amanda, a staff member in an early years setting in my constituency, said:

“I don’t think this decision reflects how important early years staff are. We feel forgotten and very put upon. We feel unprotected. Does our health not matter? Social distancing in early years is impossible.”

Amy, a childminder in Leeds, said:

“We can’t wear PPE, we can’t socially distance and we are regularly coughed, sneezed and spat on as part of our job. I accept that puts me and my family at greater risk. However, there is no recognition of this from the Government. It feels as though early years staff are being thrown to the wolves for the sake of keeping parents working.”

Just hours after the Prime Minister’s announcement last week, early years settings in my constituency were in crisis. Staff were scared and did not feel safe, protected or valued by the Government. Some of those settings chose to close on Tuesday anyway, to assess the situation fully and to conduct a proper assessment of the risk that staff were being asked to take.

That risk is significant. Jill, an early years teacher in my constituency of Leeds North West, described the risk that she takes every day. She told me:

“I am 56, with a history of cancer and lung problems. My husband is 75, and I am my mum’s support. She is 85 and has not been vaccinated yet. I am very worried that contact with so many children who cannot socially distance puts myself and my family at risk.”

Lindsay, a childminder, said that she feels obliged to earn money and play her civic part. However, she is juggling the home schooling of four of her own children and had to tell them that they cannot visit their father, who is receiving palliative care, because of the children she is obliged to invite to their home.

The Government say that there are good reasons for making an exception for early years settings. They point out that for children in that crucial age group no online substitute is available for nursery or pre-school education. That is true; there is no doubt that another lockdown would have significant detrimental effects on young children, who all depend on their routine and their social interactions. Also, early years settings provide a lifeline for children who have difficult or chaotic home lives, and are a key weapon in reducing educational inequality. And for parents, the reactive, unpredictable and knee-jerk decisions that have been taken have caused huge anxiety for them and their families. Many of them are worried about the effects of another closure; they are not only worried about their own working lives but about the psychological effect on their children.

However, these facts prompt important questions. Why is it that the Government recognised the value of early years education only after they asked staff to go on the frontline? Why has almost every other frontline worker been promised early vaccination except for these vital members of staff? Last week, I tabled a written question asking the Minister to prioritise early years staff in the vaccination effort. She wrote back, saying:

“JCVI”—

the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation—

“advise that the first priorities for the covid-19 vaccination programme should be prevention of mortality and the maintenance of the health and social care systems. As the risks of mortality from covid-19 increase with age, prioritisation is primarily based on age. Regarding the next phase of vaccine roll-out, JCVI have asked that the Department of Health and Social Care consider occupational vaccination, in collaboration with other Government Departments. The Department for Education inputs into this cross-governmental exercise and I hope that educational staff, including those in early years settings, will be vaccinated as soon as possible.”

In short, there is no saying when, or if, these members of staff will receive the vaccine. It has been clearly stated by respondents to my survey that the urgent need for the vaccine for frontline early years staff is of paramount concern. Those members of staff need a firm commitment to and a timeline for vaccination. Asking them to wait for the outcome of a cross-governmental exercise is simply not good enough.

[Alex Sobel]

Yesterday, less than 24 hours ago, I stood here in Westminster Hall and spoke in a debate before the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), but I think that we were of one mind in advocating a 24-hour vaccination programme. I repeat this call now. There are very few early years staff who I have heard from—as I said, there have been 748 responses to my survey—who would not go for a vaccination out of hours to ensure that they were protected from the virus. If we cannot provide 24-hour vaccination, it would not be morally defensible to ask staff to go to work when they do not feel safe.

The second thing that early years staff and providers, as well as parents, need from the Government if early years settings are to remain open is clear guidelines, and measures to ensure that those guidelines are being met. The working environments on which people are reporting back to me are patchy. Many early years settings have ensured that they have small bubbles and good safety procedures, but I am also hearing worrying reports of bubbles of up to 40 children, and very little protection for staff. PPE must be made available for all staff in early years settings and mask-wearing must be a requirement for every parent or other visitor to such settings.

Thirdly, we need clarity about the risk. We need to understand the full science behind every Government decision, especially when asking people to work on the frontline. Many workers in childcare settings worry about the accuracy of information on early years contraction. After all, we know how difficult and unpleasant tests are to administer ourselves, let alone to a toddler with a temperature.

Finally and crucially, early years settings need a commitment on funding. In this year of all years, the funding of a setting should not depend on 2020 or 2021 attendance. Settings where parents have had to withdraw children to protect them and staff should not be punished or suffer financially. I want to underline the point made in a letter written by Leeds City Council to the Minister for Covid Vaccine Deployment. It calls for funding to be based on 2019 attendance, with a view to a sustainable, long-term funding model for the sector.

As Helen, a provider in my constituency, warns, many early years settings are already on a very tight budget and cannot afford to open with reduced numbers and income. There is a real possibility that many groups will be forced to close permanently. This is a question of value. We know how crucial early years settings are. We know how crucial the staff are. We cannot ask them to work in an environment where they simply do not feel safe. There does not have to be a binary choice between protecting staff on one hand and ensuring provision on the other.

If this crisis has taught us anything, it is that we cannot afford to undervalue our key workers and key institutions. We cannot wait until we are back in this place after another crisis. We must ensure the financial future for our early years settings and improve outcomes for staff, families and, most crucially, children.

I want to end with a quote from Nikki, a childcare provider in Leeds. She believes that, once it is safe to do so, we must all visit settings in our communities. She said:

“MPs need to listen to staff and owners when we say we need help, to listen to the voice of children and see first hand how hard staff work, with no regard for themselves, to ensure that children in our care are cared for, loved and reassured.”

2.56 pm

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I thank my colleague from the Education Committee, the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson), for bringing forward this important and timely debate.

I, too, declare an interest: I am the father of a toddler in an early years setting. Like many parents, in the first lockdown I truly came to understand the difficulty of home-based learning and working at home. I was simultaneously trying to sit on Select Committees and take part in debates with a two-year-old wanting to climb into my lap and wave at everyone. Granted, when that happened in a meeting with No. 10, it was very pleasing to see the Prime Minister wave back. However, it causes difficulties. When the router is unplugged in the middle of a Select Committee and we have no idea what is happening, by the time we dial back in the meeting is already over.

There are difficulties, and I have nothing but respect and admiration for every parent who went through them last year. It was a difficult time but we got through it. Now we have different difficulties. We are highlighting the difficulties of a sector of the education system that has got forgotten, but it has taken this pandemic to truly see the importance of early years. We need to do that now, because the teachers and childminders, our maintained nurseries, our private settings, do a job that many people do not understand, cannot comprehend and cannot do themselves, no matter how much they wish to. Despite all my love for trying, play-based learning does not come easily to me, although I must admit that I am quite enjoying reading “The Runaway Pea” and “Superworm” almost nightly.

One positive of the pandemic is that it has re-highlighted the importance of the early years sector, and we cannot let that be forgotten. Unfortunately, far too many negatives have come out of this pandemic. To echo the hon. Member for Putney, early years intervention, which we have discussed many times in the Select Committee, really needs to come to the fore. We rightly have great intensive intervention for key stage 4 and GCSEs, but if we brought that intervention forward into primary, and ideally into early years, it would not need to be as intensive.

We have already discussed safety, and I echo the calls for the scientific guidance from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies to be brought forward to all Members of the House. Certainly, when the chief medical officer and the scientific adviser for the Department are before the Education Committee in a couple of weeks’ time, we will be calling for that so that, as an absolute minimum, we can pass on that guidance to our key workers so that they know they are safe, or are aware of the mitigating factors that they need in order to become safe.

I echo the call for key workers to be prioritised for vaccination. They are working throughout this pandemic, even against the background of the great concerns over the new variant. But for what? If we are not taking them seriously, what message do we give them? That they are important but not important enough to vaccinate? That is not a message I feel comfortable giving.

The greatest concern, however, is that of funding. While I acknowledge the per hour rate increase, it is not nearly enough. Private providers are hit with the double

whammy of financial pressures and decreased income due to children not coming in because their parents are furloughed and not working, have been made redundant or are isolating. They also face a fourfold increase in both cleaning and PPE costs. If they were a school setting they would receive assistance with those costs. However, because they are private providers, they receive no help. But there are solutions. If we look to extend the VAT holiday on PPE to private providers in nursery settings, that would go some way towards easing this financial pressure. Extending financial assistance and cleaning costs would give closer parity with other education settings.

I have heard stories of several owners of private nurseries who themselves have to do the cleaning, so they are still in the nursery at 8 o'clock at night, cleaning, to make sure that is safe for the morning, when they go back in at 8 o'clock to do a further clean to make sure it is truly safe for the children. There are so few examples of where PPE can really be worn in a nursery setting. That inevitably comes at feeding time or changing time, but these are children who learn through play-based learning. They learn through touch, hugging and kissing. It is very warming to my heart when I pick my daughter up on a Thursday if I am lucky, but if the first thing she does is pull my face mask down to give me a kiss and then pull it back up—granted, usually to cover my eyes—the sentiment that I feel is not one that a child can understand. We need to be doing everything we can to ensure that those workers are safe.

Without that help, the long-term and short-term viability of private providers comes into question. As the hon. Member for Putney has said, if these private providers do go under and fail, who is there to pick up the slack? The state and the public sector are not in a position to do so. There is not the capacity in maintained nurseries to pick up anywhere near the slack that would be needed.

We have touched on the vaccine and testing. Both need greater prevalence in our nurseries and for child-minders.

One of the biggest concerns is the findings in the letter from the Competition and Markets Authority, which has basically said that if early years settings are not providing facilities for the children, they cannot charge. It is one thing being forced to close, but when children cannot come in because they are isolating or because their parents cannot afford it, there is no recompense for those providers, who are really, really suffering. Many nurseries are worrying about making it through the month, let alone to half term.

While we sing the importance of early years, we cannot allow it to remain the forgotten education sector. We have seen an increase to primary and secondary per pupil funding, and I welcome that. We have seen an increase in funding for further education and vocational education, and I welcome that too. But for far too long we have missed out on a meaningful increase for the per hour rate for early years. It is about time that we do assess that.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) has said, it is time for a meaningful funding review. We have kicked the can down the road for far too many years, avoiding the difficult questions as to what is needed for a truly world-class early years setting. Unfortunately, we have now run out of road

and we need to make that decision now. If I could pass one plea to the Minister, it would be this: bring forward that review, start it while we are in the pandemic, so we can look at really levelling up and building an early years setting that is truly world-class, so that our children can make the most out of the opportunities they will have in a post-pandemic world. Please bring forward that review, make it meaningful and give our children the best opportunity we can.

3.4 pm

Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Robertson. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) for securing today's important debate.

The strong messages that have been given under lockdown, telling everyone to stay at home and to keep school-aged children at home where possible, are in contrast with the messages that the early years sector should remain open, and have caused confusion and concern. Families and early years workers deserve to know the scientific basis for the decision to keep nurseries open when primary schools are moving to remote learning, and they need a clear, evidence-based explanation of why this is. Early years practitioners urgently need to be reassured that their safety is being prioritised, by making regular mass testing available to them, and by Ministers' making the case to the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation that early years practitioners should be prioritised for vaccination.

This policy, like many of the policies thought up throughout this pandemic, has not considered the practicalities on the ground. For example, in my constituency of Jarrow, parents are now taking their primary school-aged children when collecting their children from nursery. That makes social distancing difficult, as it naturally leads to problems with children mixing in car parks and playgrounds outside. On the flipside of that, one mother in my constituency was so confused by the messaging from the Government around home schooling that she left a young child in front of an online lesson while she picked up her other child from the nursery school; although I cannot support that decision, of course, I understand her reasons and the difficulties that she faced.

Then, of course, there are general practicalities for early years workers in their day-to-day roles. By its very nature, early years education involves much more close contact than other kinds of education, as other hon. Members have said. Nappy changing, helping to take coats on and off, and mealtimes are all examples of where close contact is unavoidable.

The "protect early years" campaign, run by the three largest industry bodies, has called on the Government to provide scientific evidence for the decision to keep early years settings open. They have also called for early years staff to be prioritised for vaccinations. Trade unions such as Unison and GMB have further called for the closure of early years settings to all but key workers and vulnerable children during the current lockdown. I personally support those calls, and I hope the Minister will acknowledge these concerns and take them on board.

At the same time, like other hon. Members, I am concerned about the long-term impact of the pandemic on the already fragmented, privatised and underfunded

[Kate Osborne]

landscape of early years education and care. The sector needs targeted financial support for nurseries, childminders and other early years providers, which have been hit badly by a decade of underfunding and now face substantially reduced income and higher costs during the covid-19 crisis, with months of uncertainty ahead. Early years providers were struggling before the crisis, with thousands closing every year, but this crisis poses a further threat to those that have managed to survive. A loss of parents' fees during lockdown and continuing low demand for childcare due to covid-19 have left half of providers fearing closure before the summer.

Any Government change to providers' funding from this month would push 20,000 providers to the brink of collapse. The Government's decision to fund all local authority nurseries based on their one-day snapshot January 2021 census for the spring term means that early years providers with children who are off for covid-related reasons cannot access that funding. Even if all children on roll were fully funded, in most cases that would reflect a fall compared with those providers' usual numbers, as many eligible January starters' parents will have held back on taking up a place. That is putting pressure on already overstretched budgets.

Without urgent confirmation that there will be full funding of early-entitlement places, early years providers will not be able to remain open for all children. Just this morning, I heard from the headteacher of Boldon Nursery School in my constituency that it is set to lose £24,000 through the funding formula. There are four nurseries in my constituency, all outstanding: one of them, Boldon nursery, has not only provided an emergency childcare service during this pandemic, but has acted as an emergency service delivering food parcels to families in need, as well as its general role of acting as an extended family in many cases. I pay tribute to that nursery and all nurseries and childcare providers. Now they face being punished by potentially losing their jobs at the end of it.

Despite the crucial role the sector plays in caring for children outside of school hours, it has been completely neglected by the Government. The Government must urgently rethink the funding changes that will force many nurseries to close their doors, and give the sector the support it deserves.

I hope that the Minister will acknowledge how this unfairness is causing a huge amount of stress for early years leaders and workers. It is time that the Government recognised the importance of childcare and early years education for our economic recovery, and brought forward a review to ensure the safety of the workers and prevent the sector from financial collapse.

3.11 pm

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again today, Mr Robertson. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) on securing this timely and important debate. I also concur with the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) on the stopping of Westminster Hall debates. That is a huge concern; I do hope we are allowed to scrutinise the Government, especially during the pandemic.

On 4 January, the Government finally announced a national lockdown and asked secondary and primary schools to remain closed, while simultaneously asking

early years setting to open. The new variant of covid-19 has been estimated to be up to 70% more transmissible than the previously circulating form of covid-19, and it is spreading far more quickly.

We know, and the science tells us, that children can spread the virus to their parents, families and communities. We also know that it is almost impossible to socially distance when working with young children in early years settings. To quote the science: Anthony Costello, SAGE member, Professor of International Child Health, director of the UCL Institute for Global Health, and a former WHO director, said in *The Mirror* on 9 January:

"We are in a national crisis with a pandemic out of control. We should have no nurseries open."

Chris Whitty on Radio 4 on 11 January encouraged parents not to send their children to nursery if they do not need to.

The Government have left early years settings to conduct their own risk assessments, without providing them with the safety blanket of regular testing. The Government failed to prioritise regular and mass testing for staff and practitioners in early years settings and, even today, they still remain open without that support. Further to that, the early years sector has had to face the challenges arising from covid-19 and the associated costs with no increase in funding. I have been contacted by many early years settings in Bradford West, including the Midland Road nursery and Lilycroft nursery school, who are facing immense financial pressure and need the Government to act now.

In 2020, maintained nursery schools, along with the rest of the early years sector, were noticeably excluded from the Government's £1 billion catch-up funding, despite the fact that early intervention is widely accepted as one of the most effective strategies to address gaps in learning. Last year, maintained nursery schools were also barred from applying to the coronavirus fund, which was intended to assist with extra costs incurred by schools during covid-19. I was informed by an early years practitioner in my constituency that the school she represents had already spent £20,000 from very tight budgets to cover the unplanned costs in staffing and resources directly resulting from the pandemic.

The current lockdown is likely to change the number of children attending early years settings, with a number of parents making the tough decision to keep children at home. That is likely to spell ruin for the sector, as the Government have decided to change the funding entitlement on current occupancy of early years settings rather than pre-covid occupancy levels. The early years sector should not be worrying about extra costs arising from covid-19 and a funding model that is not fit for purpose, given the risks to the safety of staff and overstretched budgets. The Government must urgently review funding for early years as a priority and provide additional funding to the sector.

It appears that the current restrictions and the changing nature of the virus mean that additional funding and a review of the current funding model for the early years sector is urgently needed. Indeed, statistics from the DFE show that the percentage of maintained nursery schools in deficit increased from 3.5% in 2009-10 to 17.7% in 2018-19. The time for the Government to act is now. Will the Minister commit to rethinking the funding model for the early years sector? Will she commit to

providing additional funding to cover the cost of covid-19? Finally, will the Government prioritise testing for staff and practitioners to ensure that working environments are safe and that children and families are protected? It is not good enough that early years settings have been asked to remain open and survive without a lifeline.

3.16 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah). This is the second time today we have been in a debate: we were here at half-past 9 this morning, and we are back again for a different subject. I thank the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) for raising this essential issue. Obviously, I am from Northern Ireland, where this is a devolved matter, so the Minister will not have to respond to any of my points as it is not her responsibility, but I want to give a perspective from Northern Ireland perhaps to replicate what is happening here on the mainland. Although this is a devolved matter in Northern Ireland, the problems that arise in Northern Ireland are probably relevant from the point of view of what we have faced.

I am sure I am not the only one to have been contacted by various charities about the difficulties they have faced and will face in the near future. Action for Children made a presentation to the Northern Ireland Assembly's Committee for Education with information that can be replicated in every region of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I was asked to highlight that:

“Of particular importance...during the first lockdown, new referrals to the services often did not connect in easily with online offerings, and many staff felt that there will be many vulnerable children and families that will have missed...vital information and support around the critical 1,001 days in early development, breastfeeding and parental and infant mental health.”

They may have missed out all of that.

Initially, many services struggled to cope during lockdown. It was described to me that there was an “element of chaos”—it probably was not anybody's fault; it was just the way it all happened. We were all unable to know how to reply or respond. The Departments were responding on their feet, and things kept changing. That was also part of the problem with the system, because whenever it kept changing, parents were asking, “What's going to happen next?” The confidence in what is happening at a ministerial level needs to be addressed.

When a move towards virtual service delivery was initiated in March and April last year, most services did not have any records of email accounts for family contacts, and many did not have the technological equipment to cope with the sudden transition, which was strange and new not just to Government Departments but to all the parents, families and staff. Staff and families struggled with a lack of familiarity with the online platforms that facilitated their virtual services. There remains the issue that some families simply cannot be reached via that medium, and I believe that that marginalised those families, who faced a greater disadvantage.

In general, comments about communication from Health and Social Care and the Department of Education were positive. It was noted that there was greater regional communication and collaboration on practice and policies during the pandemic. However, many service providers also noted serious fatigue in relation to online offerings

and the fundamental value of face-to-face contact when working with early years and families. It is much better to do things face to face, though it is not always practical, so sometimes we have to do it a different way. Experiences were also very different for families with whom there was already an established relationship versus new referrals, who often did not connect easily with the online offerings. Many staff were perplexed and still feel that many vulnerable children and families will have missed vital information and support around the critical 1,001 days in early development, breastfeeding and parental and infant mental health.

Privately run programmes for baby groups, breastfeeding and sensory play, and antenatal programmes, are currently running during this second lockdown, but not with the regularity that they should. Publicly funded groups, however, are not able to continue similar support services at present. Many providers are seriously concerned that that is another way in which social inequalities are widening, and warn that those inequalities are hard to rectify through remedial policies in the long term. There are also concerns that minimal adaptations have been made to targets and monitoring processes for early years services, despite major adaptations to the way in which their offerings are delivered. The level of online engagement, for example, may not be reflected within the current target frameworks.

I am quite sure that those problems in Northern Ireland are also happening on the mainland. Action for Children has also reported that the situation has the potential to load extra stress on already highly stretched staff members who are coping with the changes by burdening them with unrealistic expectations to deliver “as things were”, as well as create content and opportunities for things “as they are”. Numerous issues have been highlighted at Stormont and are on the record there. I seek to highlight them in this place as well, to give the debate a measure of information and experience from Northern Ireland.

There is a great need for a strategy to help build those programmes to meet needs. Although we all hope that we are coming to the end of the pandemic—my goodness, I hope and pray that we are—children have lost out on a year's support, and that cannot be glossed over. It is imperative that we determine how we can ensure that each child has a foundation without cracks, or it is inevitable that they will fall through those cracks. I know that the Minister does not want that to happen. I look to the Minister and the shadow Minister to understand our strategy in moving forward with early years development without leaving children and their mummies behind. I add my support to the calls to give consideration to the extension of maternity leave, enabling mothers who have thus far been robbed of support to have a chance of accessing support and help in the formative years.

I have always wanted to say this in Westminster Hall, and I will make it my last comment: the Minister is very fortunate—she knows it, I know it—to come from Omagh. I was born in Omagh, long before she was born—maybe not long before, but a wee bit before, anyway—and I am so pleased to see a Northern Ireland export in her position.

3.22 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Robertson. This important debate has been characterised by a high degree of cross-party consensus and interest across the

[Kate Green]

nations of the UK. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) on introducing the debate so eloquently, and I thank all colleagues who have contributed and emphasised the crucial importance of the early years and the people who work in the sector.

This is a worrying time for families and early years staff, as well as a perilous moment for the whole of the childcare sector. Colleagues' efforts to raise the concerns of the sector will not have gone unnoticed. Many more colleagues would have liked to have participated today, including the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq), but they are not able to attend Parliament in person. As we have heard, a motion to halt Westminster Hall debates for the time being is before the House, but I very much hope that alternative arrangements will be put in place swiftly, so that all hon. Members can take part in all future debates.

When the Prime Minister told us last week that early years settings in England would remain open to all children in lockdown, he was essentially asking nursery workers, childminders and others to provide a fourth emergency service: an emergency childcare service for working parents—particularly key workers—and vital early years education for their children. However, although those early years practitioners deserve our greatest respect, they feel that their concerns have been disregarded. Ministers have failed to publish the scientific evidence for keeping early years settings fully open when primary schools are moving to online learning for most children.

Labour believes passionately in the importance of early years, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) and others have said, staff are anxious about their safety and the risk that they will transmit infection to their families. Someone who works in a pre-school in Leeds—my hon. Friend will be interested—accurately summed up the situation in an email to the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn, last week. That person wrote:

“there were lots of assurances in the press that early years settings ‘are safe’ but no actual data or studies, so we are expected to trust ministers. This a few days after we are...told primary schools are safe and then the next day a national lockdown is called because primary schools are vectors of transmission...Frankly I don't trust ministers telling me my workplace is safe with no actual data to back that up.”

May I repeat the request of my hon. Friends the Members for Putney, for Leeds North West and for Jarrow (Kate Osborne), as well as the hon. Member for Bury South (Christian Wakeford)? Will the Minister commit to publishing today the evidence underlying the decision to keep early years settings open?

Anyone who has had a young child or worked with young children knows that enforcing social distancing among them is impossible. We heard that graphically, for example, from my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah). As the same pre-school worker in Leeds put it,

“two-year olds do NOT sneeze into the crook of their elbow no matter how many times you might remind them. They wipe their nose on us!”

The Government do not recommend face coverings in early years settings and say that PPE is rarely needed, but we can see why the workforce is worried. Can the

Minister explain why regular mass testing has not been rolled out in all early years settings yet? When will it be? Is the Minister considering changes to the early years guidance and allowing providers to claim additional support for safety, testing and staffing? What is the Government's plan for vaccination of early years and all education staff?

Despite safety being everyone's primary concern right now, as we have heard, the early years sector is also operating under implicit threat to its funding—“Stay open for as many children as possible in lockdown or lose cash.” My hon. Friends the Members for Putney and for Bradford West outlined some of the funding pressures that settings are facing, including pressure in covering staff absence, additional covid costs for which schools were funded but early years settings were not, the lack of access to business grants and business rates relief, and the lack of catch-up funding, which was given to schools and colleges.

As we heard from colleagues around the House, in the first lockdown, providers were funded at pre-covid levels, but from this month they will receive funding only for children who attend. The hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) pointed out that we are still waiting for new guidance in this respect. With everyone now advised to stay at home where possible, demand for childcare is set to plummet further than its already low levels. Evidence suggests that many parents are keeping their nursery-age children at home.

Highlighting the dilemma that providers face, one provider asked:

“Should I be encouraging those parents to bring their child to us so we get the funding to help us survive?”

As we heard, there are places that cannot stay open because too many staff are ill, self-isolating, shielding or caring for their own children. One setting manager told the National Day Nursery Association that

“60% of my workforce is unable to come to work because they must remain at home to look after their own children who are not attending school”.

They added:

“if I reduce the number of children allowed to attend according to staff availability, then I will be unable to claim funding for the children I cannot accommodate.”

As we have heard, surveys, including one by the Early Years Alliance, found that 25% of early years providers may close within six months, due to this month's changes, which link funding to occupancy. Nearly 20,000 providers could be lost before the summer as a direct result of this policy. That survey was done before the lockdown, which will drive down occupancy further. The situation is, as we have heard, affecting providers up and down the country. Providers in my constituency have raised their concerns about the risk of closures and the impact on children—especially the most disadvantaged children. I am sure that that will be the same for all colleagues. I know that that is exactly not what the Minister wants to happen, so I urge her and her Treasury colleagues to rethink the misguided funding changes and give the early years sector the targeted support that it so badly needs to survive.

The covid-19 outbreak has been devastating for an early years sector that already faced a £600 million-plus funding gap. Coronavirus has shone a light on the

fragility of the sector and pushed tens of thousands of struggling nurseries, pre-schools and childminders to the brink of collapse. Throughout the pandemic, early years providers have been asked to take on the responsibilities of schools and the liabilities of businesses, with none of the additional support that they need with safety, testing and staffing. Now, the 300,000 brilliant, dedicated people who work in the sector, the vast majority of whom are women on pitifully low wages, are once again being asked to provide an emergency service at an extremely scary time without any scientific evidence or even a plan for their safety, and are being faced with the prospect of losing their job at the end of it. It really is not right to treat an entire workforce in that way—especially in a sector as important as early years. It is a sector on which the economy and the life chances of the next generation rely.

My challenge to the Minister is this: do the right thing. Keep early years workers safe, rethink financial support for providers, and do everything possible to ensure that a vital sector does not become one more casualty of coronavirus.

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): We have quite a bit of time, but I need to leave a couple of minutes at the end for Ms Anderson to respond.

3.32 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Vicky Ford): It is of course a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) on securing the debate. I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss this important topic, and for the contributions of all Members who have taken part—but particularly to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for mentioning the Northern Ireland situation. I enjoyed my childhood in Northern Ireland so much that I think I did P1 twice. He will get that.

As the hon. Member for Putney said, early years staff are, too often, unsung heroes. I should like to begin by offering my sincere and heartfelt thanks to the early years sector, which has been doing an outstanding job of supporting our youngest children throughout the covid-19 pandemic, in what I know are difficult circumstances. I spoke to people at the maintained nursery school in my constituency this morning. Our frontline early years staff are phenomenal, and they love and care for our children so much.

The early years experience is a vital part of a child's education. It is when children develop the communication skills that set them up for life. Those skills cannot be taught online. Early years provision also, as we know, gives parents the ability to balance work and family life. The Government invest heavily to ensure that children can get access to that high-quality early education, which includes a universal 15 hours of childcare for three and four-year-olds, the additional 15 hours for three and four-year-olds with working parents introduced under the Conservative Government in 2017, and, of course, the 15 hours for disadvantaged two-year-olds.

The Prime Minister made the announcement last Monday, on 4 January, that early years would remain open for children during the national lockdown in England. That includes nurseries, childminders and maintained nursery schools, as well as nursery classes in schools and

other pre-reception provision on school sites. It was with great reluctance that we restricted attendance at early years settings before the national lockdown in March. As I have said, early education enables very young children to develop the core building blocks of communication and social skills. They are the building blocks of life. We know that if a child's vocabulary is underdeveloped by the time they start school, they are more at risk of falling behind and being unemployed in later life. They cannot catch up those years. It is hard to imagine how to teach those communication and development skills remotely in anything like the way that is possible for older children.

We also know much more about coronavirus and our understanding of the new variant is developing. Since the beginning of the pandemic, evidence has emerged that shows the very low risk of children becoming unwell from covid, even those with existing health conditions. There is no evidence that the new variant of coronavirus disproportionately affects children. Indeed, under-fives continue to have the lowest rates of confirmed coronavirus cases of all age groups. They are less susceptible. Evidence also suggests that pre-school children aged nought to five are not playing a significant role in driving transmission. That is partly because our youngest children tend to have the lowest levels of contact with others outside their household.

We took the difficult decision to restrict attendance in schools to all except vulnerable children and the children of key workers because additional measures were needed to contain the spread of the virus in the community. Doing that has enabled us to keep pre-reception provision open to all to support parents and to deliver that crucial care and education for our youngest children. We are planning to keep early years settings open unless the scientific or public health advice changes. We continue to monitor that very closely.

I know that there is a lot of worry about safety, so I want to be as clear as I can about the safety of early years settings for children and staff. Early years settings have been open to all children since 1 June. There is no evidence that the sector has contributed to a significant rise in cases in the community. The advice of Public Health England remains that the risk of transmission of infection is low, provided that early years settings follow the endorsed systems of control that have been in use throughout the pandemic. Those measures create an inherently safer environment for children, young people and staff where the risk of transmission of infection is substantially reduced.

I met representatives of the early years sector last Tuesday morning immediately after the Prime Minister's announcement and again last Thursday. One of the things they asked for was better covid testing for EY staff. The Department worked closely with the Department of Health and Social Care and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to ensure rapid asymptomatic testing for all early years staff. The national roll-out of rapid testing, which was announced on Sunday, will support the Prime Minister's announcement for early years settings to remain open.

Local authorities will be encouraged to target testing at people who are unable to work from home during the lockdown. On Thursday, I met the Association of Directors of Children's Services to reinforce the importance of early years staff in the asymptomatic testing programme.

[Vicky Ford]

An expansion of testing will help to identify more positive cases of covid and ensure that those affected can isolate to protect those who cannot work from home in our vital services.

My hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) mentioned childminders. He is no longer in his place, but I wish his wife well. She does an important job. We are working with local authorities to put in place an appropriate route for childminders so that they can also access the asymptomatic tests.

Hon. Members have mentioned the vaccine. Those who are most vulnerable to the virus have to be prioritised for the vaccine. People working in early years who are over 50 or who are over 16 and in a higher-risk group will be eligible for the vaccine in the first phase of the programme. That includes all those over 50 or vulnerable and it will also include the early years staff who fall into those categories.

The hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) is right to have written to me. I have to resay what I said just a couple of days ago in answer to his question. The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation, which makes the recommendations for who should get the vaccine and in what order, has asked the Department of Health and Social Care to consider occupational vaccination in the next phase of the vaccine roll-out. That will be a cross-Government piece of work; that Department will need to collaborate with other Departments. The Department for Education will have input into it and we will urge the need to prioritise our absolutely frontline staff.

Alex Sobel: I thank the Minister for her assurances. She gave a little more information just now than she did in her written answer, but there is no timescale or timeline for this. Does she have any more information about when it might happen?

Vicky Ford: My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has been very clear about the timeline that he has set for getting the first phase of the vaccines rolled out, and he went through the priority groups at the stage when he announced them—was it just before the 4 January start date? We have had the mid-February date from the Prime Minister to get through the first phase. Then we will move into the second phase and, as I said, we have been asked to look at occupational roles in relation to the vaccine. That will be in the second phase of the roll-out; that is my understanding.

Kate Green: I am grateful to the Minister. I wonder whether she could clarify this. Is she saying that the consideration of occupational roles will come after the first four categories or the first nine categories that have been laid out by the Government?

Vicky Ford: I understand that they come in the second phase; that is what we have been asked to look at in the second phase.

Kate Green: Forgive me: I do not really understand what that means. Is it after the over-60s, or is it after we have dropped all the way down to the ninth category?

Vicky Ford: I have been told that there will be consideration of occupational vaccination in the next phase of the vaccine roll-out. I am sorry that I cannot

give the hon. Member more clarity than that, except to say that I very much understand that, for some workers with children—including in early years and including many of those who work in special schools and some who may be working in children's homes—it is challenging to maintain social distancing in those roles and there is a need for close contact. Those are the cases that we will be making, and I am very happy to follow up with the hon. Member and give her more detail on the second phase.

Given the goal of keeping early years settings open to as many children as possible, we also want to provide financial security to nurseries and childminders who are open for the children who need them, and many Members have mentioned that today. We have provided unprecedented support to the early years sector throughout the covid-19 pandemic and, as I have said many times, we continue to plan to spend £3.6 billion on Government entitlements this year.

In addition to Government entitlements funding, early years settings have access to a range of business support packages, including the coronavirus job retention scheme. We have updated the guidance so that providers that have seen a fall in their overall income can furlough staff who were on the payroll on or before 30 October and who are not required for delivering the Government's funding entitlements. The Government have made temporary changes to the 30 hours' free childcare and tax-free childcare entitlements during the pandemic so that eligible parents, including key workers, are not disadvantaged if their income temporarily falls below the minimum threshold and they are receiving support from a Government coronavirus support scheme, such as the coronavirus job retention scheme.

We are providing further investment next year. At the spending review, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced an extra £44 million for 2021-22 for local authorities to increase the hourly rates paid to childcare providers for the Government's childcare entitlement offers. That increase will be more than enough to meet the rise in the minimum wage. We are also increasing the funding floor so that no council can receive less than £4.44 per hour for three and four-year-olds.

In line with the spring funding announcement, we also updated the CJRS guidance so that providers who have seen a further drop in their overall income are able to furlough more staff if they are not required for the funding entitlements. Thanks to the support provided by the Government and the hard work of settings since June, I am pleased to report that last year we did not see a significant number of parents unable to access the childcare they needed.

We are staying in regular contact with the early years sector, including on the subject of funding, and will be closely monitoring both the parental take-up of places and the capacity and responses of providers, while keeping under constant review whether further support or action is needed. Local authorities have been urged to alert us to any sufficiency issues as quickly as possible.

We saw attendance rise over the autumn term, with 792,000 children attending on 10 December, up from 482,000 on 10 September. The latest attendance data from last week shows that there were fewer children in early years settings during the first week of this term compared with the end of last term. We expected attendance levels to be slightly lower last week, as we saw at the

beginning of the autumn term last September, and we often see a staggered start date back after Christmas, but we are monitoring it very closely.

We currently intend to go ahead with this year's census next week. However, I recognise the particular challenge that the sector faces in recording an accurate picture of expected uptake because of the impact of covid on attendance and the operation of settings. To support local authorities, we will very shortly be issuing questions and answers to help them to interpret existing published census guidance, so that census data reflects expected attendance and excludes what is considered to be a temporary absence or closure. That ensures that children at open providers are counted when they are temporarily not in attendance, which will be important for the providers. The Q&A will explain that in more detail.

To wrap up, I thank the hon. Member for Putney for scheduling the debate and giving us the opportunity to discuss this important issue. I hope she is reassured that the Government have the interests of children at the heart of our decision making. We are supporting our incredibly hard-working early years sector, monitoring closely the impact on attendance and whether further action is needed and getting them the asymptomatic testing within days of their request on Tuesday, and we will make the case for them to have the occupational vaccine as soon as possible.

3.48 pm

Fleur Anderson: I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to this important debate, and all those other hon. Members who I know would have liked to take part but were not able to, as well as the many people across the country who have written in to their MPs to raise the concerns of early years settings.

This debate has gone a huge way towards addressing and raising the voices from the frontline, which is what needed to happen. There are many areas of cross-party agreement here, as the shadow Minister has said, and I recognise the steps that the Minister has already taken to address some of the concerns we have raised. However, there are a couple of areas of unfinished business that I would like to raise.

I thank the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), who is not in his place now, for raising the independent meaningful review. That would answer many of the questions that we have raised about not only short-term but long-term funding for the early years sector, which has been rocked by the covid pandemic and will need extensive changes to ensure that it is resilient and strong for the future.

I thank all hon. Members who have spoken in the debate about their experiences or those of their own nurseries and headteachers, and about the concerns that are being felt. We share some things. We share the understanding of, support for and knowledge of the

importance of early years education. We share a feeling of huge respect for early years staff, who are doing an outstanding job. We share a feeling that early years settings have been ignored too often, and that must be changed.

We have heard from the frontline that staff are scared, concerned and confused. I welcome what the Minister has said about monitoring the safety of early years and a commitment to reviewing that. Potentially, that means a commitment to closing down if the early years settings are not safe. I would like to go further and ask for that evidence to be published. That would go a long way towards helping to assuage a lot of the concerns.

I welcome the commitment to the expansion of testing and delivery, which was raised with me most often by my local headteachers and early years practitioners, and to include childminders further down the line. All those staff will need that assurance and knowledge about testing, especially because there is so much asymptomatic coronavirus in the community.

I also welcome the commitment to rolling out the vaccine—definitely to some in the first phase and potentially to some in the second phase—and to having a little more clarity on that. What that means and when it will happen was unclear to us, and will definitely be unclear to others. We would like some early indication of, at least, when the decisions will be made and how, so that people can plan and have some confidence.

I welcome the additional investment in early years next year, but I do not think the Minister will be surprised to hear that I think that might be too late for some. Additional investment, really understanding the census that she mentioned and the funding going to councils for the free entitlement need to be addressed right now. It is not enough to save the sector next year, because of the backward steps in its finances. Early years settings have gone to the extent of their reserves, and then some, in coping with this year and will need more funding next year. Further clarity on the use of the census date is needed. Going back to pre-covid levels is the fairest way to do this, because they all have pre-covid costs and they need pre-covid levels of funding. We need to look again at that date, perhaps when the census has been held and the results have come back, to see whether that is enough funding for nurseries—that would be very welcome.

I thank the Minister for her response and all Members for taking part today. As we all have, I thank again all early years staff, practitioners and childminders across the country for the work that they do day in and day out for our children.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the effect of the covid-19 outbreak on early years settings.

3.52 pm

Sitting suspended.

Squash: The Olympics

[ESTHER McVEY *in the Chair.*]

4 pm

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,
That this House has considered squash and the Olympics.

It is always a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms McVey. This is the second time that I have secured a debate about squash in the Olympics. The first was in July 2016, when I made the case for squash to be included on the Olympic games programme. The reason I am before the House again is that unfortunately squash did not make the list of sports included in the 2016 Rio Olympics, the postponed 2020 Tokyo Olympics, or the Paris Olympics scheduled for 2024. Nothing has changed in that respect.

What has changed is that my dear friend the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) is not responding on behalf of the Government, as she did in the July 2016 debate. We share a passion for sport and I am sure that she is watching today, so will Members please join me in sending her our very best wishes? I am sure the Minister will do a great job today, but he has big shoes to fill—no pressure.

My love of sport began when I was a child. I was very shy and did not speak in my primary schools. I got beaten up by some teenage girls when I was walking home on my last day in my junior school, and my mother decided that I needed toughening up, so she sent me to judo classes. I found my voice—indeed, some would say that I have not stopped talking since—and I made many lifelong friends. I got my senior black belt first dan when I was 13 and my fourth dan in 1974. I won many Welsh and national titles. I was a member of the Great Britain youth squad that went to the Munich Olympics, and I retired from judo in 1975. In Cynffig Comprehensive School, I had the opportunity to play other sports and represented Wales schools in hockey, tennis and athletics. Sport gave me a focus and confidence and made me a team player. Some would say that I went to school only to play sport.

My love for squash began when I was supporting myself through university and had a job as a sports coach in the newly built Bridgend Recreation Centre near the village of Kenfig Hill in south Wales, where I was born and brought up. I was teaching sports in the main hall when I heard a thudding noise, so I went to investigate. I climbed some stairs up to a balcony and saw below me two men locked in a room with very strangely shaped rackets, hitting a little ball into submission. It was love at first sight—not the men, but the game—so I hired a racket, scrounged a squash ball and spent every spare minute on the squash court teaching myself to play.

The squash players at Bridgend Recreation Centre adopted me and I made the men's team. I was invited by Squash Wales, the national governing body for squash in Wales, to the national trials for the Welsh ladies' squad and got selected after playing squash for only six months. I went on to represent Wales more than 100 times, sometimes at No. 1 for the team. I won some national and international titles, including the Dutch Open, but my forte was losing in the final. I have lost count of how many times I have come second in national competitions.

Squash is a great game. It is dynamic, physically and mentally challenging, strategic, tactical—it is like chess on legs. It is a healthy sport for all ages. Squash shares some similarities with other racket sports, but it is the only racket sport where players share the same space. There are differences, too: for example, in common parlance “nick” means stealing, but in squash it is where the wall meets the floor. If someone hits the ball into the nick, it is irretrievable; it is the perfect shot. “Boast” usually means singing one's own praises, but in squash it is a shot where someone hits the ball against the side wall on its way to the front wall, and that is a really deceptive shot.

A tin is usually something that holds baked beans, but in squash it is the line on the front wall of the court above which the ball must be hit. Tea is a drink, but in squash the T is a place in the centre of the court that players seek to dominate in order to control the rally. Performing squash movements without the ball is known as “ghosting”—I am doing it now, and with squash courts closed at present, I am doing a lot of ghosting in my living room.

Squash has given me so much: fun, fitness, lifelong friends and a job. When I retired in the early 1990s from international competition and had a squash sabbatical, I took up marathon running. In 2004, I called Squash Wales to try to track down an old friend. The director of coaching and development, Mike Workman, said, “Chris Rees, I haven't heard from you for ten years. We need more women coaches, and there's a coaching course tomorrow. I'll put your name down.” I said to him, “Mike, I am not a coach, I'm a player.” But I lost that argument, and every other argument, I think, when I went on to work for Mike at Squash Wales. I worked my way through the qualifications and am now a level 3 coach, tutor and assessor, and have become a Welsh national coach. I was honoured to receive the Sport Wales coach of the year award in 2008—the only racket sports coach to receive that award so far.

One of the best experiences of my life was pulling on the red shirt and playing for Wales, representing my country, but it is wonderful to coach a youngster from beginner to playing for Wales, helping them develop into a confident, skilful, respectful and well-rounded player. As part of the very successful Squash Wales junior development programme I encouraged children to take up squash, taking them through the squad system—if that was what they wanted—or simply helping them enjoy playing the game that I love. I am proud that two players, products of the Squash Wales junior development programme, are now international stars: Tesni Evans from Prestatyn, aged 28, and Joel Makin from Aberdare, aged 26, are both ranked No. 9 in the January 2021 world rankings. Children as young as age four take up squash, and there is a masters circuit for everyone aged over 35 to over 80. Competitions are held in many countries, and there are also the world and European championships. A few years ago, the Welsh team were the over-70's world men's champions. They were all skill, trickery and bandages, but not much movement on court. Sport is hard on the body's joints, especially judo, marathon running and squash, and I have done all three. That is especially the case when there is a habit of over-training as I had and as I have now, and I thank my orthopaedic consultant Mr Chandratreya for looking after me and for keeping me going.

The Minister is aware, through his responsibility for the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games, that squash has been in the Commonwealth games since 1998, as well as the Asian Games since 1998, and the Pan-American Games since 1995. The British Open squash championships have been taking place since 1920, and the Welsh Open began way back in 1938. The International Squash Rackets Federation was formed in 1967 and is now called the World Squash Federation. It is recognised as the international federation for squash by the International Olympic Committee. We now have over 50,000 squash courts in over 185 nations from the Arctic circle to the bottom tips of South America and Australia. Squash is a genuinely global sport played by millions all over the world. Professional senior tour events have been hosted by 47 countries featuring players from 74 nations, and over 750 players from 69 countries compete on the men's and women's professional squash tours. The WSF world junior circuit has world, regional and national junior open events. We have world and European rankings for juniors, seniors and masters. Squash has full gender parity, and all major events offer gender-equal prize money. Squash is fully World Anti-Doping Agency compliant. We have highly qualified referees, led by the World Squash Officiating director, my good friend Roy Gingell from Maesteg—no one messes with Roy.

Squash is televised via state-of-the-art all-glass show courts, with glass floors and side door options. Squash is very cool. It is presented very differently on the professional tour from when I used to play. There is music, lighting and MCs. An old friend of mine from Cardiff, Robert Edwards, started the cool commentaries and is known as the voice of squash. We have super slow-mo replays, multi-camera angles, in-play stats, live web transmission and full match videos uploaded on demand. What other sport has had championships played in a stunning site next to the pyramids in Egypt, in New York's Grand Central station, on the Bund in Shanghai and in many other innovative indoor and outdoor settings?

In 2005, London won the bid to host the 2012 Olympic games. The sports for 2012 were announced and squash came top of the shortlisted sports to be included. At that time, James Willstrop and Nick Matthews of England were ranked world No. 1 and 2, so were potential gold and silver Olympic medallists. Jenny Duncalf and Laura Massaro of England were ranked world No. 2 and 3—potential silver and bronze medallists. I must admit that our Welsh players were not quite as highly ranked but, as I said, Tesni and Joel are making great progress up the world rankings.

It was not expected that any places would be available among the then 28 maximum sports to be included in the London Olympics, but baseball and softball were taken out, so we thought that squash, being top of the shortlisted sports, would replace baseball or softball, but that did not happen, and London ran with only 26 sports. When Rio won the host bid in 2009 for the 2016 Olympics, the two vacant spots were filled by rugby sevens and golf. They are great sports, especially rugby—being Welsh, I would say that—but do they really fulfil the International Olympic Committee mantra that the Olympic games should be the paramount event of a sport?

The IOC subsequently decided that one sport would be removed from the 28 sports selected for the 2016 games to make room for a new sport in the 2020 games.

Wrestling was removed, but then added back into a shortlist of eight. The list was then reduced to three sports: wrestling, baseball and softball, which were combined into one sport, and squash. In 2013, wrestling—not a new sport—was voted back in, although squash was, in fact, the only new sport on the shortlist.

Tokyo won the hosting rights for 2020 and persuaded the IOC that, as host, it could add two new sports. Originally, they were squash and baseball and softball combined, because they were the two on the shortlist, but Tokyo opened it up to other sports to bid for a place and selected a shortlist of eight from the 25 sports that had applied. In August 2015, each sport gave a presentation to the IOC, and Tokyo selected five sports, not including squash. They were baseball and softball combined, karate, skateboarding, sports climbing and surfing.

Paris will be the host city for the 2024 Olympic games. There are many excellent squash court venues in Paris that could be used, where glass show courts could be set up. Hon. Members can appreciate how devastated I was to discover that breakdancing, known as breaking, had been included by the IOC in the Paris games ahead of squash. The jury is still out on whether it is a sport or not, but including it in the Olympics ahead of our genuine sport is heartbreaking—do you get the pun there?

Since 1986, we have campaigned for squash to be in the Olympics and made some truly fantastic presentations, but the presentation for the Paris Olympics was the most ambitious ever. The WSF and the Professional Squash Association combined to launch “Squash Goes Gold”, a web and social media campaign. It was launched just before the 2018-19 PSA world championships, played inside Chicago's Union Station. It built on the global growth of squash over the past decade and allowed players from all over the world to unite behind one common goal. France's top-ranked woman player, Camille Serme, who has won the British and the US opens, took part in the bid. France has also had two recent men's world No. 1 players, Thierry Lincou and current professional Grégory Gaultier. As hon. Members can imagine, the opportunity to compete in the Olympics in their home country and in Camille's home city, and possibly win a medal, would have been the pinnacle of their careers.

When I watched the campaign film, it gave me goosebumps and reminded me of all the reasons why I am a squashoholic. My old friend Andrew Shelley, chief executive of the WSF from 2010 to 2019, has worked in squash for over 40 years and has been involved in all the Olympic bids. He says that he would not change one moment of his time working in squash, but that our non-selection for the Olympics is his greatest disappointment. Andrew was awarded the MBE for services to squash in the new year's honours list. He is now creating a world squash library, and one day I hope there will be a special section in his library titled “Squash makes it to the Olympics.”

Jahangir Khan, who is the greatest player of all time—six world titles, 10 British Open titles, unbeaten for five and a half years in the early 1980s—as well as the former WSF president and current emeritus WSF president, has said,

“We have been running bids for so many years and these sports”—breaking, surfing, sport climbing and skateboarding—

“weren't in the queue and now they are. It's really hard to understand”.

[Christina Rees]

Malaysian female star Nicol David has said that she would give up her eight world squash titles for one Olympic gold medal, which shows just how much taking part in the Olympics means to squash players. Many politicians play squash: it is a great stress-buster. I do not have time to name them all today, so I will just mention my good friend Mark Drakeford, the First Minister of Wales, who is a very enthusiastic and accomplished squash player.

Why is it so important to get squash into the Olympics? There are many practical reasons, including increased funding, but the opportunity to showcase squash on the biggest sporting stage in the world, so that our fantastic players can be seen, is the main reason why we will not give up. I do not have any specific asks of the Minister, because I know he does not have power over the IOC. He may be relieved to hear that, but if he could write to the IOC supporting squash's bid to be in the next Olympics and increase funding for a sport that has to fight for every penny, I would be grateful. I am not sure what sports the Minister plays, but if he plays squash, I will be his coach. If he does not play squash and wants to take it up, I will teach him how to play. Any support we can have from the Minister to get squash into the Olympics, I would be really grateful for.

4.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I must first congratulate the hon. Member for Neath (Christina Rees) on having secured this debate, and on the interesting speech she has made today, making the case for including squash as a future Olympic sport with great passion and conviction, and indeed a bit of humour and humility. I was relieved to hear her say that she would happily be my coach, rather than my competitor, at squash; it has been many years since I played squash, but perhaps that should be my new year's resolution. I look forward to taking her up on that offer at some point.

One of the great joys of Westminster Hall debates is that they often allow us to find out a little bit more about the background of some of our colleagues, and it has been fascinating to hear about the hon. Lady's background and to do some reading about her over the past few days. I am now aware of her great interest in squash and of the very valuable contribution that she has personally made to the sport, both as a top-class player and as a coach. I am also astounded that she excelled in other sports, including judo and marathon running.

As the hon. Lady is a previous recipient of Sport Wales's female coach of the year award, I know how committed she is to sport in general and to squash in particular, and she deserves great praise for those efforts. As she said, squash is an exciting and dynamic sport that has a long and proud heritage in this country, having its origins, of course, in Harrow School. The national performance centre in Manchester is helping to build our world-class strength, with British women leading the way; there are currently three British women in the world's top 20, which I am sure is also part of her legacy. Previous British world champions—such as Laura Massaro,

Nick Matthew and others who she referred to—are indeed great role models, and of course the future inclusion of squash in the Olympics would be an excellent showcasing opportunity to help the sport to grow further.

However, it is right that the decision to add any new sport to the Olympic programme is a matter for the International Olympic Committee to consider. The hon. Lady outlined the process very well. It would not be appropriate for me or the British Government, or indeed any national Government, to become involved in that process, or to lobby for any particular sport to be included. But please do not interpret, or misinterpret, that comment as a lack of enthusiasm or interest. It is a statement of fact because, according to the Olympic charter, every national Olympic committee must be free from Government interference. Hence, it would not be appropriate or helpful for me to comment further on the inclusion process. As I say, please do not interpret that as a lack of enthusiasm; should squash be included in the Olympics, I would embrace that decision and be very happy indeed.

Of course, it is open to the relevant national governing body of a sport to make a case for its inclusion, as indeed it has, along with the appropriate world governing body. I understand that squash may be under consideration for Olympic games beyond Paris 2024, so we might see it in Los Angeles. Therefore, the appropriate bodies to lobby would be the British Olympic Association or the World Squash Federation. However, I know that they are in discussions about squash, as the hon. Lady outlined, and have been for many years. Many sports quite rightly aspire to being included in the Olympic programme; there is a strong incentive for them to be included. We are now just six months away from the rescheduled Tokyo games, which I am sure will be a wonderful spectacle for athletes and fans alike as we emerge from the pandemic.

Although competition in Tokyo will undoubtedly be extremely strong, I know that our athletes are ready to give it their all and make our country proud, so I can well understand why globally renowned sports such as squash would wish to be included in this wonderful festival of sport, reaching a global audience of billions and inspiring audiences at home and abroad.

Squash has embraced innovation in recent years, as the hon. Lady outlined in detail, to make it a more televisual sport and also to put it in the lead in terms of gender parity, along with many other racket sports, such as tennis. I am very proud to say that my daughter is a great and avid fan of squash as well.

I know that the forthcoming Commonwealth games in Birmingham in 2022 will provide a fantastic opportunity to showcase squash on the global stage for millions of people, because, of course, squash is included in the Commonwealth games and the Commonwealth games being held in the UK again in 2022 gives us a wonderful chance to promote the sport domestically, while showcasing once again the UK's ability to host major international sporting events.

Increased participation is vital to the lifeblood of any sport, helping to feed the elite level and to build healthy grassroots. That is why the Government's strategy, "Sporting Future", puts increased participation at the heart of the long-term direction of sport in this country. The cross-departmental strategy focuses on using sport to improve and measure the physical and mental wellbeing of people,

as well as individual, social, community and economic development. Although UK Sport does not currently fund squash, it supports the sport domestically and in the field of international relations—for example, in bidding for major events such as the world championships.

The home nations' governing bodies continue to invest substantially in squash at a grassroots level to encourage participation and foster talent. Since the hon. Lady and I were first elected on the same day in 2015, Sport England has invested more than £8 million directly in English squash. I understand that other sporting bodies have as well. That significant funding contributes to a wider financial package that totals about £49 million, in which squash is cited as one of the benefiting activities.

The pandemic presents great challenges for sporting organisations at an elite and grassroots level, but with our vaccination programme ramping up, I am confident that there is light at the end of the tunnel and that sport will be able to return again very soon. There is certainly a strong case to be made for such an innovative and exciting sport as squash, as the hon. Lady outlined incredibly well in her speech. It could grace the world's biggest sporting stages. As always, a great chance for Britain to win medals is welcome news for any Sports Minister. I am sure that my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), to whom the hon. Lady sent her best wishes, which I repeat, would agree.

Of course, there are right and proper procedures that must be followed to secure a global platform for squash at the Olympics, as we outlined. I encourage the hon. Lady to continue to lobby and highlight that case, as she has done so well today. Squash certainly has a strong case to make to the IOC should it so choose. More widely, I reassure her that the sport remains healthy in this country. I expect that health to continue to improve and to deliver not only world-class performance internationally, but more opportunities in this country to enjoy playing the wonderful sport.

Question put and agreed to.

4.27 pm

Sitting suspended.

Waste Incineration and Recycling Rates

4.30 pm

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered waste incineration and recycling rates.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey, and to see many familiar faces in today's debate. This is the third time we have debated incineration in this Chamber since the election and it was a pleasure to attend the two previous debates. It is also great to see the Minister in her place. She has been on the receiving end of my many frustrations when it comes to this topic, both here and in the main Chamber, and in the many conversations that we have had offline. I am grateful to her for being here to respond yet again to a debate on this topic.

The Minister and, indeed, the House will know full well my frustrations with the incinerator in Beddington in my Carshalton and Wallington constituency. Next to the additional £500 million for my local hospital and to build a new local hospital, this is one of the topics that I speak about most in this House. I will not revisit many of the arguments that the Minister and many of my colleagues who are here today will have heard in past debates. However, I want to address some developments with my local incinerator that I have not yet had the chance to raise in the House, before going on to discuss the impact of incineration on recycling rates.

The Minister will know the concerns I have raised with her in the past about emissions breaches in incinerators; the need for independently run air quality monitoring stations near those sites, rather than leaving them to be self-reporting by the operator; the need to focus on the circular economy, reducing the amount of waste we produce in the first place; and the all-important knock-on effect of operating incinerators, such as traffic movements in the surrounding area.

Carshalton and Wallington residents were promised quite a lot when the Liberal Democrats approved the building of an incinerator in Beddington. They were promised the Beddington farmlands, which are now several years overdue. They were promised things such as new wildlife habitats to rebuild rare species, only for the water levels surrounding ground-nesting birds for protection to be allowed to drop and for predators to attack and destroy their nests last year. They were promised robust reporting on carbon, only for there to be, by my calculation, 184 incidences where they exceeded the 150 mg carbon monoxide limits and 733 invalid carbon monoxide reports in 2020 alone. They were promised a stronger local road network to cope with the traffic, only for residents on Beddington Lane to constantly face problems with their traffic and air pollution, and much more besides. It is no surprise that residents feel let down and even angry that the concerns they continue to raise continue to be brushed aside and not acted upon.

There have been new developments at Beddington that have caused alarm. Today, I want to focus on the new south London waste plan. The plan is supposed to bring together the lead members from four councils in south London—Sutton, Kingston, Croydon and Merton—and ultimately decide a strategy on how to deal with

[*Elliot Colburn*]

their waste. In short, the strategy is to make Sutton and particularly Beddington Lane the dumping ground of south London. Under the plan, Sutton will ambitiously take more than 700,000 tonnes of waste from the four boroughs—more than half of all the waste produced by the four boroughs. Croydon is taking about 19% and Merton is taking about 26%, but the real winner here is Lib Dem-run Kingston Council, which is taking a measly 2.6% of all waste produced across four London boroughs. To add insult to injury, Beddington is increasing its maximum capacity by around 45,000 tonnes, taking it to 347,422 tonnes of waste per year.

Together with the waste plan, the increase in Beddington's maximum capacity and the approval of a new Suez site in Beddington Lane means around 1 million tonnes of waste a year are projected to be sent there. To put that into perspective as it is quite a large number, that is around 500 heavy goods vehicle movements a day just for waste, let alone all the other industrial sites that require heavy goods vehicles in Beddington. Even the applicants during the planning committee for the Suez plan inferred that this could equate to a vehicle movement every three minutes.

The uplift in the maximum capacity at Beddington was approved by the Environment Agency on 9 December. I urge it to reconsider granting that uplift. It is baffling to me that the South London Waste Partnership, which oversaw the plan, went on to meet more than a week after the decision was taken, on 17 December, and suddenly decided that it was not entirely happy with the increase in Beddington's capacity. I am slightly confused as to why it did not know that the decision had been taken over a week beforehand, and what the point of the partnership is if the lead councillors from the four boroughs have no control or influence over decisions of this nature. To many residents, this appears nothing more than a convenient distraction to allow the Lib Dems to pursue their implied ambition to make Sutton the dumping ground of south London and give their mates in Kingston a hand, at the expense of roads and air pollution in Sutton.

I had hoped that we might get answers to these questions last night, when the Conservative group on Sutton Council brought a motion to full council stating its opposition to the increase and asking that Sutton gets a fair share. However, during what I can only call a childish debate, the Lib Dems reverted to their usual diktat on the incinerator: "Nothing to see here. Not me, gov. We're ambitious about our waste plans here, mate." They then proceeded to vote for an amendment that removed the very line that called for Sutton to get a fair share.

Let that sink in for a bit. The Lib Dems essentially voted against Sutton having a fair deal on waste management. That is disgraceful. The Beddington farmlands have been delayed, wildlife habitats have been attacked, air quality monitoring is negligent, roads are unable to cope, and now we have a projected almost 1 million tonnes of rubbish making its way to Sutton, much of it to be burned. Under any measurement, this is a bad deal for Beddington, for Hackbridge and for Carshalton and Wallington as whole.

I will move on to the wider impact of incineration on recycling rates. We have not had the chance to discuss that issue in previous debates. The proponents of incinerators

often point to recycling as a metric of their success and how they are better than landfill. Although the latter is certainly true, as landfill is the worst of all options, the same cannot be said for recycling rates. As landfill sites have begun to close and be phased out, incineration has picked up much of that demand, with incineration rates rising nearly four times, from 12% to 44%, over the past decade. However, recycling rates have barely moved at all in the past decade, from 37% to 43%—just a 6 percentage point increase.

That is not coincidental or unrelated. According to very worrying research by the House of Commons Library, the data from the 123 waste authorities show a general negative relationship between incineration and recycling. In other words, higher incineration means lower recycling and vice versa. I have seen that at first hand in Beddington, where I watched as recyclable material was put into the incinerator to be burned. Even I did not know how bad the situation was until I read research from Zero Waste Europe, which revealed that more than 90% of materials that end up in incineration plants and landfills could be recycled or composted—more than 90%.

Quite apart from the obvious negatives, burning those valuable materials in order to generate electricity can discourage efforts to preserve resources and can create perverse incentives to generate more waste to ensure that the energy from these waste plants remains economical, rather than focusing on prevention and recycling. I have again seen that at first hand in Carshalton and Wallington, with residents asking what the point is in separating their rubbish into four, five or six different bins if they get held in the back of the same lorry and end up getting burned.

I have also attempted to have the calorific value of waste explained to me, and how the waste needs to be burned in order to generate the so-called energy from waste. It is some kind of perverse metaphor for a diet. I will leave aside the problems of energy from waste, which I am aware the Minister knows full well from the discussions we have had about New Mill Quarter in Hackbridge, where the homes are supposed to be heated by this incinerator, yet suffer high bills and regular outages. I appreciate that the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has done a consultation on that, and I will continue my discussions with it.

Even when energy is turned into waste, recycling is still the better option, as it can save up to five times the amount of energy produced by energy from waste, which is not a renewable resource, creates toxic pollution and potentially emits more carbon dioxide than some hydrocarbon-powered plants. In other words, incinerators need waste to have an effective business model, whether recyclable or not. That is not recycling.

That prompts the question: what is the solution? I want to draw attention to some of the really good work being done by the Government. I am sure the Minister will have more to say on these topics in her reply. The Government have, in the resources and waste strategy, set out their ambition to move away from incineration in favour of maximising recycling, with the possibility of an incineration tax. The Environment Bill brings in powers to introduce charges on single-use plastics and ban things like plastic straws, stirrers and cotton buds. The deposit return scheme, which has seen recycling rates rocket in over 40 countries, is due to come to the

UK. There is a ban on exports of polluting waste to developing countries, a single-use plastic packaging tax, plastic bag charges, carbon capture and storage funding and the all-important commitment in the resources and waste strategy to move to a more circular economy.

I congratulate the Government on their work, but urge them to move at pace towards a circular economy. We must look further up the waste hierarchy to achieve this, so I have a few asks. The next steps up our waste hierarchy are recycling and reusing waste. We have heard startling figures about how much recyclable material ends up in incineration and this must be stopped. Things such as an all-in deposit return scheme to open up the concept to as many recyclable materials as possible as well as creating new responsibilities when sorting waste to prevent as much recyclable waste from ending up in incinerators as possible will certainly be good steps. Removing recyclable and compostable waste from incineration will greatly reduce the need for incinerators and help the Government achieve their target of moving away from this form of waste management.

However, we all know that the best approach is to reduce the amount of waste we produce in the first place. It is even better than recycling, because it involves less energy, less extraction of raw materials, and so on. That is why there needs to be a much greater emphasis on reducing production, such as placing responsibilities on producers, incentivising minimal packaging methods, for example, making it easier—indeed the norm—to choose the more environmentally friendly option, whether that be domestic products such as food packaging, all the way through to heavy industry. The new hospital that is being built in my area has the requirement to be carbon neutral and I look forward to seeing the inventive ways it goes about that and manages to achieve that goal.

However, it is clear that Carshalton and Wallington has been failed on this incinerator by a council that is not willing to act. Incineration may be marginally better than landfill, but it is not the way to boost recycling or create a more circular economy in the long term. We need to look further up that waste hierarchy and do much more to recycle, reuse and ultimately reduce the amount of waste we produce to help make the need for incinerators, such as the one that has caused my constituents so many problems, obsolete.

Esther McVey (in the Chair): I hope to call the Front-Bench speakers at about 5.10 pm, which means that people have about six or seven minutes for their speeches.

4.42 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McVey. I thank the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) for securing this debate. I do not think I have spoken in a debate with him before. It was interesting to hear about the local government politics of south-west London. I have to say, Lib Dem councillors in south-west London are no different from those in Leeds, so I have some sympathy for him. It is a shame no Lib Dem Members are here today to answer for themselves—I am sure the hon. Gentleman will agree with that, although he may not agree with everything I say.

Sustainability is one of the biggest and most important challenges facing our country. On a finite planet, we cannot afford to run a throw-out society indefinitely. In the UK, we consistently miss household recycling targets. Figures showing that more than 70% of UK packaging waste was recycled or recovered in 2017 disguise the fact that recovery includes incineration. The real recycling rate is closer to 45%, compared with 54% in Wales, where Labour is in charge. In fact, Wales is a world leader when it comes to sustainability and recycling, with statutory recycling targets, national recycling campaigns and, most importantly, £1 billion to local authorities since 2000 to help them invest in recycling collection services. Wales essentially operates a circular economy, or very close to one, and has constitutionally enshrined rules that promote sustainable development, such as the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.

Unfortunately, the picture is quite different in my home city of Leeds. I frequently receive emails from constituents disappointed by Leeds's lack of kerb-side glass and Tetra Pac recycling. I will tell you, Ms McVey, what I tell them and I am sure the Minister will want to respond. This is not the product of a lack of political or environmental will on the part of Leeds City Council, where I was in charge of this area when I was on the council. It is the result of a lack of funding from central Government and a broken system for recycling waste where the market lords it over the environment. Unfortunately, the amount of money needed to change collection vehicles and routes, to provide bins and boxes and for other associated costs is not available, and recycling facilities are not provided by the private sector as the market price for certain renewables is too low.

Recycling has been one of the quiet casualties of the austerity programme and an ideology that refuses to fix our broken markets. Local authority cuts and a free market ideology are a huge part of why the national recycling rate has been at a virtual standstill over the last few years. The latest set of cuts to Leeds City Council with £40 million of covid cost pressures and another £60 million of just run-of-the-mill Government austerity means that closure proposals are being ramped up. Ellar Ghyll recycling centre in Otley in my constituency is being proposed for closure only due to covid cost pressures. I hope the Minister can help me in my campaign to save that centre.

Recycling rates, however, have been soaring during the pandemic. The Local Government Association reports that eight in 10 councils have seen an increase in the amount of recycling collected since the start of lockdown. Some councils' household recycling increased by 100%. That is positive news, but the Government must recognise that that has increased costs for councils and ensure that all the extra cost pressures on waste and recycling services as a result of the pandemic are met; currently, they are not.

I turn specifically to food waste, which we know to be a catastrophic problem not just in the UK but worldwide. A third of food produced globally is wasted. In the UK, households waste 4.5 million tonnes of food every year. Supermarkets and other food-adjacent businesses are the main offenders, wasting 100,000 tonnes of readily available and edible food each year, which is equivalent to 250 million meals going uneaten. Surplus food should be used to feed people first before it is sent for animal feed, incinerated for energy or sent to anaerobic digesters. Many fantastic initiatives ensure just that.

[Alex Sobel]

I pay particular tribute to The Real Junk Food Project, which started in Leeds and with which I have been working for nearly 10 years. It has been a pioneering force in the fight against food waste, with a core mission of feeding those in food poverty—another issue that has spiked during covid. We must ensure that large stores stop throwing away or destroying unsold food. Supermarkets should donate food waste to charities or food banks willing to take food. Again, we can look to Labour in Wales, where household food waste has reduced by 12% and is now 9% lower than in the rest of the UK.

The incineration of waste with energy recovery is slightly preferable to waste being incinerated without any energy recovery or sent to landfill, but without carbon capture and storage technology I cannot in good conscience support it. I admit that the Government are investing in CCS, but we have no full-scale working models. Without trying to pre-empt what will be said by my neighbour, the hon. Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore), I am sure he will touch on the campaign started by his predecessor against the proposal for an incinerator there. He has my sympathy and support on that, and I think he knows that—we have discussed it previously on the train.

Waste incineration is usually referred to as energy from waste, but the energy generated by energy-from-waste plants represents just 1.9% of overall UK electricity production. While electricity and reusable waste heat are clearly valuable by-products of incineration, they cannot legitimately be claimed to be the main purpose of incineration, nor can there be an economic or sustainability justification for using it as a disposal method. However, there is still no large-scale Government funding programme to support the development of anaerobic digestion, which is the solution for much organic waste that local authorities collect. Will the Minister comment on what funding she plans to bring forward for anaerobic digestion? I note that she is not wearing her leaf suit today, which is unfortunate for a debate of this nature, but I know how close these issues are to her heart and that she will want to support more anaerobic digestion.

We should also consider the fact that the smelly, loud waste incinerators that regularly breach pollution guidelines are three times more likely to be built in poorer areas than in the UK's wealthiest areas. Nearly half of the new incinerators on track to be built will be in the UK's 25 most deprived neighbourhoods, and more than two thirds are planned for the northern half of the country. More than 40% of existing incinerators are sited in areas more diverse than the local authority average.

At COP24, which I attended two years ago in Poland, Sir David Attenborough warned delegates that

“we are facing a man-made disaster of global scale. Our greatest threat in thousands of years: climate change. If we don't take action, the collapse of our civilisations and the extinction of much of the natural world is on the horizon.”

I am fairly sure that the action he had in mind did not consist of building new incinerators up and down the country. We need to come up with more innovative measures, alternative solutions to reducing consumption, boosting recycling and increasing the proportion of

recycled material manufacturing. We need a green industrial revolution and a circular economy. That is the way forward, and I look forward to the Minister outlining how the Government will achieve that.

4.50 pm

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs McVey. Climate change is one of the biggest threats we face, and so it is right that the Government are taking significant action to combat it. As part of this, I welcome many aspects of their approach to waste and recycling, in particular the commitment to creating greater consistency in recycling collections. An example of where that would be useful is among students coming to any town in the country, who are used to one form of recycling and then discover there is a totally different one where their university is, and everybody has to be re-educated every year.

We have one very good example of an excellent charity in Loughborough that deals with recycling and reuse, called SOFA. It is absolutely superb at keeping a lot of furniture and household goods out of the recycling chain, and selling it on for reuse. However, one aspect of the Government's approach to waste and recycling needs to be revised, and I certainly support the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn). I have made clear in previous debates and correspondence with Ministers my concern regarding the building of new incinerators because of their impact on the environment and the health of local communities around them. I have pressed for more research to be undertaken to better understand their impact on those with higher activity respiratory levels.

That is particularly relevant to my constituency, where an incinerator is being built in close proximity to elite athlete training grounds. As the Minister set out in her response to my recent written question, since 3 December 2019, all incinerator permits have contained lower limits of total particulate matter of 5 mg per cubic metre, and permits issued before that date will be changed to require compliance with the lower limit by 3 December 2023.

Although that is welcome—and it is very welcome—I ask that incinerators that have been issued permits but are currently under construction should also have to comply with the lower limit from the outset. I have also been contacted by a local group who are calling for specific PM 2.5 limits to be introduced, rather than just limits for total particulate matter. Further, following the Climate Change Committee's recommendation that all 2020 incinerators should have carbon capture and storage, the local group would also like it to be a requirement at the point of construction in any planning conditions, including those currently under construction. I would welcome the Minister's comments on those points.

We are also actively encouraging individuals and companies to recycle more and produce less waste. Over time, we will become less reliant on incinerators, and there will not be enough waste to keep existing incinerators open. In my constituency, there is already not enough commercial and industrial residual waste locally to keep the new incinerator going, so waste will inevitably be brought in from afar by road, leading to increased vehicle emissions around the M1 and the A512 and creating further pollution in our local area from waste produced elsewhere.

Finally, I would argue that the incinerators could impact on the Government's commitment to net zero emissions by 2050 by not encouraging recycling and reuse, as my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington mentioned earlier. If we are to achieve this ambitious target, we must work to reduce emissions from all sources.

4.54 pm

Craig Williams (Montgomeryshire) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) for securing this important debate, and for the way he opened it. I know that the Minister, who has—as we all have—spoken on this subject over the months and years, will agree about the circular economy and with much of what we have said to date, and I look forward to her response.

Research done by WRAP Cymru in Wales found that 75% of the 'ingredients' for incinerators in Wales could have been recycled. We are missing a trick as we look at the development of incinerators, and I will touch on that in respect of my constituency of Montgomeryshire. Equally, turning to my Celtic cousins in the north, the Zero Waste Scotland review found that the only energy source with a comparable carbon intensity to energy from waste was coal. We know full well what has happened to coal power stations in this country. If incinerators follow them, I hope the Minister will promptly look at the waste-to-energy plans going forward.

In my constituency, there is a development for an incinerator and I pay tribute to Councillor Amanda Jenner, who is part of our Conservative team. I note the comments about the Liberal Democrat administrations and councillors across the country, and I share some of the fears outlined today about some of their actions.

Councillor Jenner is leading a campaign to ensure that there is proper consideration of any major planning applications during this pandemic. I note the concern of the community and the councillors right now that a planning application for such a substantial incinerator is being put forward. It is a difficult time to organise community meetings and get the proper planning representations in.

My chief concerns around incineration are that, while there is a role for it, there is new technology emerging that will deal with things that are non-recyclable at the moment. The landfill of the past was awful, and I speak on behalf of a massive rural constituency when I say that landfill is not something we enjoy. However, now we have taken a lot of organic matter out of landfill, there is a role for looking at the non-recyclables and a way to store them either in warehouses or in some new landfill of the future where that resource could be mined when the technology is available to recycle it. I welcome the Minister's thoughts on looking at the current non-recyclables and a way of storing them for the short period while we invest in technologies to increase our recycling.

I pay tribute—to lend a non-political angle—to much of the Welsh Government's work on the recycling targets. As a Welsh Member of Parliament, of course we work across the parties on this. The recycling targets are ambitious and are being met. Our local authority of Powys in Montgomeryshire is doing a terrific job, both

for education and the facilitation of recyclables. It is a great shame when the community sees a planning application for a large incinerator in a very rural area that will require huge HGV movements from across the border in England and from a large area of Wales. Montgomeryshire is 840 square miles with 50,000 people. That does not lend itself to a huge industrial incinerator with waste transported on our struggling trunk roads.

The main thrust of my contribution to this excellent debate and what I am looking to the Front Bench for is to see what the Minister's priorities are, looking forward, for both waste-to-energy and incineration more broadly with the investment in anaerobic digesters. I do push back a bit, because for my constituents in Montgomeryshire, anaerobic digesters are being brought forward by private investors—the agricultural community, especially poultry farmers. Anaerobic digesters are receiving a lot of private funding. The Government do not necessarily need to put a lot of money that way, but they do need to look at the regulatory framework and non-fiscal support. I know the Treasury will welcome anything right now that does not require a cheque book.

Anaerobic digesters are taking a lot of the organic waste out, so then we can look at the non-recyclables. That is not necessarily needing to burn them, but looking in the future to see how we can store and mine them as a resource. I know there is a time limit, so I will wind up but I reinforce my point that while incineration has had a role to date, I look forward to a way that we can wind it out of our circular economy over the decades.

4.49 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) for securing this important debate. I also refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests and declare that my family runs a plastic waste recycling business.

I want to use my limited time today to talk specifically about waste incineration, touching on my concerns about how decisions regarding new incinerator applications and environmental permitting for waste incinerators are made, and the future direction of waste incineration itself.

I am sure we are all aware of the waste hierarchy. It gives top priority to preventing waste in the first place. When waste is created, it gives priority to preparing it for reuse, then for recycling, then recovery, and last of all disposal—landfill and waste incineration. I believe all Government policy should be based on this hierarchy.

There is a strong case to argue that if sufficient weight is given to utilising waste incineration as an option for dealing with waste, then a fiscal disincentive, an incineration tax, should be considered as an option, as we have with the landfill tax—I would also favour increasing landfill tax—because otherwise that can become a barrier to developing a greener circular economy, by preventing resources from being reused and depressing recycling rates, and, as a method, incineration gives rise to air pollution concerns.

I want to touch on air pollution. It is quite clear that the process of incineration from waste creates a number of emissions, and there is much concern regarding waste incineration and air quality and human health.

[Robbie Moore]

This concern relates predominantly to particulate matter, which is predominantly composed of materials such as sulphate, nitrates, ammonia, sodium chloride and black carbon. The Minister will be aware that, back in 2018 and 2019, Public Health England funded a study to examine emissions of particulate matter from incinerators and their impact on human health. The study found that emissions from particulate matter from waste incinerators are low, and make only a small contribution to ambient background levels. However, while levels may be low, this study acknowledged that there is a contribution nevertheless. There will be many factors that influence the impact on air quality and human health that the incinerator can have, such as the stack height of an incinerator, whether the incinerator is located in the bottom of a valley, the resultant impact of temperature or cloud inversions, and its proximity to homes, schools and playing fields.

Rather frustratingly, and despite huge amounts of local opposition—including from an excellent and well-run campaign group in my constituency, the Aire Valley Against Incineration, along with many residents, myself, and my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), from my neighbouring constituency—the green light has just been issued for the Aire Valley incinerator to operate. This incinerator is to be built on the periphery of Keighley, in the bottom of a valley in close proximity to schools, playing fields and homes. The scheme was awarded planning consent and given the green light by our local authority, Bradford Council, back in 2016, and earlier this year was awarded an environmental permit by the Environment Agency. All this despite strong local opposition.

Residents are quite rightly concerned about air quality—not just from the incinerator itself, but from the increased traffic flows bringing waste to the site. In questioning the decision making for the environmental permit that has just been issued by the Environment Agency, unbelievably, I was told that the Environment Agency could consider only emissions from the incinerator itself, not the emissions from increased traffic flows, because that was a planning matter, which Bradford Council, in already giving the green light, had considered acceptable in the first place. This raises a much bigger issue: the process of how permits are awarded for incinerators. My concern is that a cohesive, full-picture review is not taken into account when looking at the impact on air quality from the whole incineration process itself, which includes the emissions from traffic flow.

For me, this debate is vital. As a Member who sat on the Environment Bill Committee, I am pretty excited about what the Government are doing going forward. However, I reaffirm my commitment that all Government policy should go back to that first waste hierarchy and look at adopting a review of whether an incineration tax is the right route to go down, as I believe it should be.

The message from Keighley is that we do not want this incinerator. It is unfortunate that it looks as if the green light has been given, but local voices should be heard much more loudly and clearly in any decision-making process for anything that is likely to have an impact on air quality or human health.

5.5 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms McVey, and to speak for the Opposition this afternoon.

I should say at the outset that I am a mere stand-in for my departmental colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones), who is the shadow Minister for waste. Because of the travel restrictions, she has to be in Wales and, until we have the motion on Westminster Hall debates later today, there is a requirement for these debates to be held in person. I must say, it is quite extraordinary that we are all being put at risk, including the staff in this place, because—to use the jargon—it was not possible to “flex” the rules sufficiently. I hope it can be fed back how unhappy some of us are about being put in that situation.

More positively, I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) for calling the debate. I listened with great interest to his account of the difficulties around the Beddington incinerator, approved by the Lib Dem-run London Borough of Sutton and clearly causing a range of problems for him and his constituents.

However, the collective task of tackling waste, improving recycling rates and taking the steps needed to protect our environment and preserve our planet is one that we need to do together. I am afraid it is no secret that the Opposition side of the House have concerns about what we see as a lack of ambition on the Treasury Bench when it comes to these issues. The Minister will recognise this familiar refrain from our many hours spent on the Environment Bill; we tried to make constructive and effective suggestions for improvement but, as these things go, they were sadly voted down.

As we have heard, incinerators emit large quantities of CO₂, with roughly 1 tonne released for each tonne of waste incinerated. About half of that is derived from fossil sources such as plastic, meaning that England's incinerators rely on fossil fuels for feedstock, as most plastics are derived from crude oil or natural gas. I am told that incineration capacity in England is currently around 17.2 million tonnes—some 14.6 million of built capacity and 2.6 million under construction—and the waste industry is proposing a further 20 million tonnes of capacity for England.

As we have also heard, however, existing capacity already exceeds the quantity of genuinely residual combustible waste. Allowing even more incinerators would exacerbate that overcapacity, giving rise to avoidable pollution and expense while harming waste reduction and recycling efforts.

In short, we should now acknowledge that the time for incineration is over and that the age of incinerators should come to an end. Once, one might have said that incineration was an improvement on the previous practice of landfill, but I no longer feel that that is the case. I note that across England, incineration has increased in inverse proportion to the reduction in landfill in recent years.

I say to the Minister that an over-reliance on incineration as a means of tackling waste will, in the end, serve no one. That over-reliance will prevent us from moving up the waste hierarchy in dealing with waste generally and will stop us looking at waste as a resource that can be recycled and reused, its value unlocked rather than buried or contributing to toxic air.

I also know that a number of my hon. Friends around the country have raised concerns about incineration in their communities in recent months. My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), who wanted to speak in this debate but could not be here today, has asked me to emphasise a point he has made about the urgent need for clarity from the Minister on waste movements around the UK, including between England and Wales. In previous debates, he has made clear his opposition to the incinerator planned by an English company for the east of his constituency, which is currently with the Welsh planning inspectors and which likely plans to burn commercial waste shipped across the border.

I will also mention my hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor), who has a particular interest in the impact of incineration on the health and wellbeing of her constituents in north London, and my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), who chairs the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, and who I remember expressing concerns in this very Chamber about the planning decisions that he feels do not consider the cumulative impact of multiple sites in close proximity. Similarly, my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) has an incineration facility at Hillthorn Park in her constituency. I know she is watching the debate this afternoon.

My hon. Friends' passion crosses regional and national borders within the UK. As we grasp the challenge of reducing our reliance on incinerators, our response needs to be an all-nation response. Will the Minister outline what specific discussions she has had with Environment Ministers in the Welsh Government and the Northern Ireland Executive, and with the Cabinet Secretary in the Scottish Government on tackling the over-reliance on incineration?

Over the past two decades, the household waste recycling rate in England has increased significantly, from just 11.2% to almost 50%. I am pleased that for half of that time a Labour Government ambitiously pushed for a change of behaviour and real action on the green agenda. However, I must point out that England still falls short of the EU target of recycling a minimum of 50% of household waste by 2020. Our departure from the EU does not mean we should shift gear or slow down. We need to go further and faster.

As of 2018, Wales is the only nation in the UK to reach the target, and in 2017 it recorded a recycling rate of 64%. I pay tribute to the Welsh Labour Government, particularly the First Minister and the Environment Minister, Lesley Griffiths MS. I also endorse the excellent speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), who not only pointed out those successes in Wales, but made important comments about food waste.

The Minister knows that England is responsible for the overwhelming majority of waste in UK households. It is vital that England and therefore this Government show leadership and act. If we need further evidence of the need for swift action, we need look no further than DEFRA's own resources and waste strategy monitoring report from August last year. It tells us:

"The large amount of avoidable residual waste and avoidable residual plastic waste generated by household sources each year suggests there remains substantial opportunity for increased recycling."

The message from that assessment is that a substantial quantity of material appears to be going into the residual waste stream, where it could at least have been recycled or dealt with higher up the waste hierarchy. So there it is. We have to take this seriously now.

The issue is not just about waste here at home, but about the fact that English waste, for want of a better description, has an international impact, too. In a written parliamentary question, my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West asked the Secretary of State

"what discussions he has had with his Sri Lankan counterpart on the 21 containers of waste returned to the UK from that country in September 2020."

The answer she received from the Minister, who is here today, was revealing. She said:

"The Environment Agency...as the competent authority for waste shipments for England, is proactively engaging with the authorities in Sri Lanka on these containers and is leading the response on this matter. The 21 containers arrived back in England on Wednesday 28 October. The containers, which were shipped to Sri Lanka in 2017, were found by Sri Lankan authorities to contain illegal materials described as mattresses and carpets which had been exported for recycling. With the shipment now back on English soil, EA enforcement officers will seek to confirm the types of waste shipped, who exported it and the producer of the waste. Those responsible could face a custodial sentence of up to two years, an unlimited fine, and the recovery of money and assets gained through the course of their criminal activity."

That answer is telling, because we cannot rely on incineration, nor should we think we can simply ship our worries and our waste overseas. The ship that left Britain in 2017 with our waste came back to bite us in September 2020. We simply need to resolve these issues.

This subject is topical. Did the Minister and the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington have the opportunity to read a piece in *The Guardian* over their porridge? If not, I want to let them know that the UK has been accused of failing to honour its promise to

"curb shipments of plastic waste to developing countries, after it emerged Britain's new post-Brexit regulations are less stringent than those imposed by the EU."

The article notes:

"From 1 January, shipments of unsorted plastic waste from the EU to non-OECD countries were banned. But Britain will continue to allow plastic waste to be exported to developing countries",

despite a Conservative party manifesto commitment to banning the practice. That is important, because we are one of the biggest producers of plastic waste in the world, and we export about two thirds of it. The shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), has put it well:

"The government has made big promises to match environmental standards from Europe and to ban plastic waste exports. There can be no dither or delay. The British people expect to see these exports banned, more recycling of materials at home and faster action on the climate crisis. It is up to ministers to deliver on their promises and fast, but this does not look good."

In conclusion, I urge the Minister to think about the social cost of the issues we are discussing, as well as the environmental costs. It is important to remember the role of local authorities here too. They are on the frontline of waste collection and recycling. I urge the Minister to make the strongest representations to Treasury Ministers to ensure that councils have the resources they need. The Minister will recall that until the end of last year we were covered by the EU waste directive, among other pieces of waste-related legislation. Can she update the

[Daniel Zeichner]

House on what she is doing to ensure no lowering of the standards in that directive now that the transition has come to an end? Can she also confirm that the UK will maintain the EU definition of waste?

Labour is committed to increasing recycling rates and improving the processes around doing so. We recognise the importance of taking people with us and argue that if we do not have buy-in from the public, we are unlikely to achieve the sort of change and progress that our planet desperately needs. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington for calling this debate and optimistically encourage him to support our amendments to the Environment Bill when they are debated on Report, because that is how we will seize the opportunity to put incineration behind us and move forward to a new world of ambitious and effective recycling, one that recognises and unlocks the value in what was once seen as waste.

Esther McVey (in the Chair): Before I call the Minister, I remind her that Elliot will need a few minutes to wind up.

5.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): It is an absolute pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mrs McVey.

I thank all hon. Members who have taken part in this debate, on what remains a very fiery topic. We have all been here before, and I think it shows how much interest and knowledge there is on this subject. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) in particular for securing the debate. I understand that he has particular concerns for his constituents relating to the energy recovery facility at Beddington, as well as the draft south London waste plan. He pulled no punches on the subject of his Liberal Democrat council; I think he has got that firmly on the record.

Indeed, we had another attack on a Liberal Democrat council from the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), although he seems to have disappeared. He also raised some concerns about his council's plans. The local authority for Sutton, in which my hon. Friend's constituency is situated, is achieving a recycling rate of about 49% and is about the fifth highest of the London boroughs. It is therefore making strides in this particular direction, although he raises important issues about whether incineration is the agreed method for achieving much of that.

As I have said in previous debates, the Government's intention remains very firmly on "reduce, reuse, recycle", moving the country towards a circular economy. Every hon. Friend and Member has mentioned this, even the shadow Minister and I agree on this, and it was very eloquently put in particular by my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Craig Williams). Actions that we are taking will minimise the amount of waste that reaches the lower levels of the waste hierarchy. That is very important, as we heard about from my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore), who uses his experience in the industry to draw our attention to that issue. This is the Government's intention, and everything in the Environment Bill is moving us in that direction.

Evidence of our determination and commitment to limiting the waste that needs to be treated at energy-from-waste facilities, or in landfill for that matter, can be seen quite clearly through the landmark Environment Bill, which we introduced to Parliament in January 2020. Among other things, it contains broad powers to establish deposit return schemes, such as for drinks containers, and extended producer responsibility, and to stipulate a consistent set of materials, including food waste, that must be collected from households and businesses to help to make recycling services more consistent.

The Government are committed to improving the quality and increasing the quantity of materials collected for recycling so that we meet our target of 65% of municipal waste being recycled by 2035. However, to meet that target, recycling will have to be easier for householders. My hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Jane Hunt) raised the issue of students being confused when they go from one area to another, and she is absolutely right. That is why we are making consistent collections law under the Environment Bill.

In those collections, the core set of materials that will need to be collected will be plastic, metal, glass, paper, card, food and garden waste. The hon. Member for Leeds North West raised food waste. It is a shame he is no longer in his place, because I wanted to highlight that food waste is going to be collected; that is absolutely essential. Just over £16 million is in the process of being awarded, or has already been awarded, to ensure that food waste is collected and redistributed by more than 300 organisations. That has been really important during the coronavirus pandemic, and I wanted to highlight that.

Anaerobic digestion is the preferred treatment for food waste. We are seeking views on that in our consultations, and we will be publishing them shortly. My hon. Friend the Member for Keighley also raised that. We have to take a balanced approach as we consider all these things. Anaerobic digestion can also produce digestate, and one has to consider what the effect of that will be on the environment, so all these options have to be considered in the round.

The Environment Bill will help us drive towards a minimum 70% recycling rate of packaging waste by 2030, and we will be consulting shortly on those measures, together with further action on waste prevention. That will help us reduce the amount of England's waste that goes to incineration and landfill.

I hear the concerns that my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington raised previously about the fact that having a waste incinerator in the local area can affect recycling rates. Existing permit conditions, together with new measures that we introduced in October 2020, will restrict energy-from-waste plants from accepting material that is suitable for recycling. It is not the intention that it goes to incineration. Reuse, recycle and longer life have to come long before anything gets to incineration. We need to get higher recycling rates across the board, and local authorities will have to take that into account.

Despite our high ambitions, there will always be waste that cannot be recycled or reused, potentially because it is contaminated or because there is no end market. There are choices to make about how we manage that unavoidable residual waste, and in making them we need to consider the environmental impact.

The legacy of our reliance on landfill is responsible for about 75% of carbon emissions from the waste sector, so it is not a simple matter of switching back to landfilling non-recyclable waste. That is why we have been very clear in our resources and waste strategy, which I am glad the shadow Minister has brought to our attention, that we wish to reduce the level of municipal waste sent to landfill to 10% or less by 2035, and it is why we are actively exploring policy options to work towards eliminating all biodegradable waste to landfill by 2030.

Incinerating waste also carries a carbon impact, but the evidence available to us shows that for most mixed-waste streams commonly sent to energy from waste plants, the carbon impact is lower than if it was sent to landfill. One of the main issues is the fossil plastic content in the residual waste stream. Measures that we are putting in place will limit the amount of plastic and other recyclables that end up in energy from waste, and that will help to reduce greenhouse gas impacts. We will continue to consider what else we can do to ensure we remain on our pathway to meet net zero.

Of course, the Government also want to drive greater efficiency from waste plants, including through BEIS initiatives, to encourage the use of the heat that the plants produce, as well as the electricity generated. In addition, other thermal technologies, which we are following closely, can potentially achieve greater efficiency, reduce the environmental impact and deliver outputs beyond electricity generation.

It should also be noted that carbon capture technology could be applied to energy-from-waste facilities, with the potential to reduce emissions from that sector further. Where applicable, pre-combustion capture technologies may be able to produce low-carbon fuels from our waste, which can be used to decarbonise further sectors of the economy.

The Prime Minister's 10-point plan to transform the green economy includes new measures to become a world leader in carbon capture usage and storage, with an ambition to capture 10 million tonnes of CO₂ a year by 2030. That is equivalent to all the emissions from, for example, the industrial Humber today. We have announced an extra £200 million of new funding to create two carbon capture clusters by the mid-2020s, with another two set to be created by 2030.

Air quality has been touched on by a number of my hon. Friends. The Government are fully committed to reducing air pollution. The World Health Organisation has praised the UK clean air strategy as "an example for the rest of the world to follow".

I have quoted that many times. We are delivering a £3.8 billion plan to clean up transport and tackle nitrogen dioxide pollution. Rightly, air quality was raised by a number of Members, but we are getting to grips with tackling it, particularly through the measures in the Environment Bill, so I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough will agree with me that we are driving in that direction.

The Environment Agency assesses the emissions from new energy-from-waste plants as part of its permitting process, and consults Public Health England on every application that it receives. The Environment Agency will not issue an environmental permit if the proposed plant will have a significant impact on human health and, indeed, the environment. Once they are operational, the plants are closely regulated.

I understand that my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington recently called for more air quality monitoring stations to be put in place across his constituency, especially near the Beddington waste incinerator, so that residents can have access to air quality data, but the Environment Agency has said that ambient air monitoring around operating incinerators is not a reliable method of establishing the impact, as it does not identify the source of the emissions. We consider it better to use air dispersion modelling to predict the impact, based on the highest allowed emissions. We have audited the modelling and we are satisfied that it is suitable for assessing the impact from the installation. Hon. Members should note that Public Health England has stated that

"modern, well run and regulated municipal waste incinerators are not a significant risk to public health."

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington on raising the issue with us yet again. I hope that I have reassured him that the actions we are already taking will lead to higher levels of recycling and shift us towards the circular economy, away from take, make, use and throw, which everyone has lived with for so long. It is essential that we move. Harnessing the energy within residual waste has its place as part of a holistic waste management system delivering value from resource.

I just want to touch on the tax issue. Should wider policies not deliver the Government's waste ambitions in the long term, the introduction of a tax on incineration of waste will be considered, taking into account how a tax would work alongside landfill tax and the possible impacts on local authorities. Similarly, the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Cambridge, knows that we have committed to banning sending polluting plastic waste to non-OECD countries. We shall consult all the relevant people about that shortly. I shall wind up there, leaving my hon. Friend to conclude.

5.28 pm

Elliot Colburn: I thank the Minister for wrapping up the debate, and am indeed reassured about what the Government are doing. My concern comes from the fact that my local authority is failing the residents of Beddington, in particular, so badly. I thank all the hon. Members who have attended and taken part in the debate, many of whom have attended many such debates before. We raised many salient points, and I do not have time to go through them all, but I want to press again the point about the need to look further up the waste hierarchy in dealing with waste in the United Kingdom, and to get compostable and recyclable waste out of incinerators and therefore reduce the need for them. Through behaviour, and through policy incentives, we can move to a place where incinerators are needed less and less. Let us hope that in future they will not be needed at all. I join my hon. Friend the Minister in welcoming the recycling rates in Sutton. Residents are working hard to do the right thing. It is just a shame that the council does not back them to do it. I thank everyone for attending the debate.

5.30 pm

Sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Tuesday 12 January 2021

DEFENCE

Defence Equipment Plan

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace):

I wish to inform Parliament that the permanent secretary for the Ministry of Defence has written to the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee with our 2020 update on the affordability of the defence equipment plan, covering the period 2020-21 to 2029-30. His letter and the supplementary tables have been placed in the Library of the House and published online. This more concise update takes the place of the usual equipment plan financial summary report and maintains continuity of financial reporting ahead of implementing the outcomes of the spending review and integrated review. I welcome the continued engagement of the National Audit Office (NAO) who have today published their independent assessment of our plans.

Last month, the Prime Minister announced a once-in-a-generation modernisation of the armed forces including £16.5 billion additional spending on defence over the next four years. I am determined that we seize this opportunity to modernise the armed forces to meet today's threat while taking hard decisions to put defence on a sustainable footing. To do so will require a transparent approach to taking these decisions, inviting robust scrutiny of our plans and recognising where we could be doing more to deliver better value for our spending.

In this context, today's update on the affordability of our plans as they were in April 2020, are a reminder of the challenge ahead and the need for decisive action now to ensure that we match our ambition and resources.

Over the year to April 2020, our central estimate of the shortfall in funding for equipment spending increased from £3 billion to £7 billion over 10 years, with potential for this to be greater if risks materialise and we take no action to intervene. This increase was largely the result of three sources of increased costs:

Deferral of spending on some projects to save money in the short-term while allowing decisions about their future to be taken in the context of the integrated review;

There were more limited opportunities to reduce the cost of established projects than in previous years and projects were more confident in delivering milestones and achieving their spending forecasts; and

Risks materialising including less favourable foreign exchange rate forecasts and additional non-discretionary spending in high-priority areas including the nuclear enterprise that we were not able to fully offset through savings.

The settlement we have received in the recent spending review means we are now in a position to tackle the root causes of these issues. We are already using the findings of the NAO's assessment of the equipment plan alongside our work on these issues to improve our approach to implementing the outcomes of the spending review and ensure that our plans are affordable and deliverable.

I am pleased to see that the NAO has recognised the progress we are making in some areas, including management of efficiencies. Our ambitious transformation programme will build on this progress.

I expect our 2021 edition of the equipment plan financial summary to present the implications of the spending review and integrated review for equipment spending and on progress in improving the management of our plans.

Attachments can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2021-01-12/HCWS700/>.

[HCWS700]

No-cost Supply to Lebanese Armed Forces

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace):

The UK intends to supply a fleet of vehicles at no cost to the Lebanese armed forces (LAF), in recognition of our strong relationship in tackling the shared terrorist threat.

At present the LAF do not have the capability to fully patrol Lebanon's border with Syria and have requested the UK's assistance in providing suitable equipment to fulfil this requirement. The UK has agreed to supply 100 surplus army revised weapon mounted installation kit plus (RWMIK+) vehicles in response to a request from the Lebanese commander-in-chief.

The supply of these vehicles will greatly enhance the LAF's capacity to mount long distance patrols across rugged mountainous terrain and allow their land border regiments (LBRs) to more effectively counter the threat of armed smugglers and extremists trying to enter Lebanon.

The 100 revised weapon mounted installation kit plus (RWMIK+) vehicles, valuing £1,502,000, are surplus to the needs of the British Army. The logistical costs of collating and then transporting the vehicles to Lebanon will be borne by the Conflict Stability and Security Fund, and training in the operation of the vehicles will be borne by the defence acquisition fund (south).

Delivery of the RWMIK+ to Beirut is expected to commence in January 2021.

[HCWS702]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures

The Minister for Security (James Brokenshire):

Section 19(1) of the Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures Act 2011 (the Act) requires the Secretary of State to report to Parliament as soon as reasonably practicable after the end of every relevant three-month period on the exercise of her TPIM powers under the Act during that period.

The level of information provided will always be subject to slight variations based on operational advice.

TPIM notices in force—as of 30 November 2020	3
Number of new TPIM notices served—during this period	0
TPIM notices in respect of British citizens—as of 30 November 2020	3
TPIM notices extended—during the reporting period	1
TPIM notices revoked—during the reporting period	1
TPIM notices revived—during the reporting period	0
Variations made to measures specified in TPIM notices—during the reporting period	3

Applications made to measures specified in TPIM notices refused—during the reporting period	0
The number of subjects relocated under TPIM legislation—during this the reporting period	3

Two individuals have been charged with breaching their TPIM notices in this period.

The TPIM Review Group (TRG) keeps every TPIM notice under regular and formal review. Fourth quarter TRG meetings were held on 14 and 15 December 2020.

[HCWS698]

NORTHERN IRELAND

Northern Ireland Assembly: Petition of Concern Mechanism

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Brandon Lewis): I am today laying before both Houses of Parliament the second report by the UK Government on the use of the Petition of Concern mechanism in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

As part of the New Decade, New Approach deal upon which devolved Government was restored in Northern Ireland on 11 January 2020, the UK Government committed to undertaking such a report every six months.

This report covers the period from 10 July 2020 to 11 January 2021, during which no Petition of Concern has been lodged against any motion in the Assembly.

The next UK Government report on the use of the Petition of Concern will cover the period from 11 January 2021 to 10 July 2021.

The report notes that full implementation of the Petition of Concern reforms in New Decade, New Approach will require Westminster legislation. The Government will bring forward such legislation when parliamentary time allows, after which the Assembly will be able to reflect the detail of the reforms in its standing orders.

[HCWS701]

TRANSPORT

M25 Junction 10 Upgrade

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson): I have been asked by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State (Grant Shapps), to make this written ministerial statement. This statement concerns the application made under the Planning Act 2008 for the proposed alteration and upgrading by Highways England of the existing M25 junction 10 roundabout.

Under section 107(1) of the Planning Act 2008, the Secretary of State must make his decision within three months of receipt of the examining authority's report unless exercising the power under section 107(3) to extend the deadline and make a statement to the Houses of Parliament announcing the new deadline. The Secretary of State received the examining authority's report on

the M25 Junction 10/A3 Wisley interchange development consent order application on 12 October 2020 and the original deadline for a decision was 12 January 2021.

The deadline for the decision is to be extended to 12 May 2021—an extension of four months—to enable the Secretary of State to consult further on the application including on the question of appropriate provision of replacement land to compensate for the proposed special category land to be compulsorily purchased under the development consent order.

The decision to set a new deadline is without prejudice to the decision on whether to grant development consent.

[HCWS697]

TREASURY

Public Service Pension Scheme Indexation and Revaluation 2021

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Steve Barclay): Public service pensions continue to be among the very best available.

Legislation governing public service pensions requires them to be increased annually by the same percentage as additional pensions (state earnings related pension and state second pension). Public service pensions will therefore be increased from 12 April 2021 by 0.5%, in line with the annual increase in the consumer prices index up to September 2020, except for those public service pensions which have been in payment for less than a year, which will receive a pro-rata increase. This will ensure that public service pensions take account of increases in the cost of living and their purchasing power is maintained.

Separately, in the career average public service pension schemes introduced in 2014 and 2015, pensions in accrual are revalued annually in relation to either prices or earnings depending on the terms specified in their scheme regulations. The Public Service Pensions Act 2013 requires HMT to specify a measure of prices and of earnings to be used for revaluation by these schemes.

The prices measure is the consumer prices index up to September 2020. Public service schemes which rely on a measure of prices, therefore, will use the figure of 0.5% for the prices element of revaluation.

The earnings measure is the whole economy year-on-year change in average weekly earnings (non-seasonally adjusted and including bonuses and arrears) up to September 2020. Public service schemes which rely on a measure of earnings, therefore, will use the figure of 2.4% for the earnings element of revaluation.

Revaluation is one part of the amount of pension that members earn in a year and needs to be considered in conjunction with the amount of in-year accrual. Typically, schemes with lower revaluation will have faster accrual and therefore members will earn more pension per year. The following list shows how the main public service schemes will be affected by revaluation:

Scheme	Police	Fire	Civil Service	NHS	Teachers	LGPS	Armed Forces	Judicial
Revaluation for active member	1.75 %	2.4 %	0.5%	2%	2.1%	0.5%	2.4%	0.5%

[HCWS699]

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