

Thursday
14 January 2021

Volume 687
No. 160



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 14 January 2021

House of Commons

Thursday 14 January 2021

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: I should like to add to my brief comments yesterday to pay tribute to Godfrey Cameron, who passed away on Tuesday. Godfrey was part of the security team who did so much to keep us safe here. He was a very popular and respected colleague, always looking to help and to make a difference. He will be greatly missed. Our condolences go to his wife, Hyacinth, and his children, Leon and Renee.

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

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

Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Scottish Goods: US Tariffs

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): What steps she is taking to reduce tariffs on the export of Scotch whisky to the US. [910744]

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What progress she has made on the removal of US tariffs on Scottish goods. [910764]

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Elizabeth Truss): My right hon. Friend has been a huge champion for Scotch whisky. We have been working hard to de-escalate this conflict and get punitive tariffs removed on both sides of the Atlantic. That is the way forward, not escalating this tariff dispute.

David Mundell [V]: The Secretary of State has worked incredibly hard in negotiating with the United States to try to find a bilateral settlement to the Airbus-Boeing dispute to facilitate a deal with the US. Of course she is aware of the significant damage that the Scotch whisky industry continues to suffer, with export losses now approaching a staggering £450 million. Will she reassure me that as soon as possible after the new US Administration is in place, she will urgently pick up negotiations on a deal to end tariffs? Will she update the House, before that, on what support she requires from other UK Government Departments to ensure that a deal is agreed by the whole of the UK Government?

Elizabeth Truss: I completely agree with my right hon. Friend about the urgency of ending this tariff dispute. I have been clear with the United States and the

European Union that we want to de-escalate it and reach a negotiated settlement. This dispute has already been going on for 16 years and has caused much damage. I am seeking an early meeting with the new US trade representative, Katherine Tai, and this will be one of the items on my agenda. I am also working closely with the new Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on this issue.

John Lamont: I know that everybody in Government is working hard on this, but I want to reiterate the huge financial strain that the tariffs are having on the textile and cashmere industry in my constituency in the Scottish borders, which I fear will cost many local jobs. Will the Government consider offering financial compensation to the firms affected to protect local jobs and this industry?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. We are looking at supporting industry, including through the BEIS fund that will invest £10 million to help distilleries go green, and no doubt the Treasury is looking at other affected industries as well. If we had accepted the advice from Labour to put additional tariffs on US products such as sweet potatoes and nuts, we would likely be hit by more tariffs as Germany and France were, as announced on 30 December.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State has threatened to reimpose tariffs on the United States if the Airbus dispute is not settled, but that threat will only carry any impact if the US believes that we have the legal authority to carry it out. Will she agree to publish the UK's legal advice or our exchange of letters with the World Trade Organisation to prove that she is not bluffing and that we genuinely have the authority to reimpose those tariffs if we need to do so?

Elizabeth Truss: I am very clear that we have the authority to impose those tariffs. We have acquired rights as a result of leaving the European Union. But I go back to the point I was making: the hon. Gentleman has advocated putting additional tariffs on products such as sweet potatoes and nuts, so presumably he thinks that we have those acquired rights.

Free Trade Agreements: Small and Medium-sized Enterprises

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): What steps she has taken to help ensure that SMEs in Sedgefield can benefit from future free trade agreements. [910745]

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): What steps her Department has taken to help ensure that SMEs in Buckinghamshire can benefit from future free trade agreements. [910761]

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): The Government have included, and will continue to seek to include, specific SME chapters in all our free trade agreements to ensure that SMEs are provided with the information necessary to make informed commercial decisions and seize the great new opportunities provided by these agreements.

Paul Howell [V]: The support for SMEs in the trade agreement is great to see, but may I ask the Minister to continue that with a free trade agreement for the USA that supports companies like Kromek in Sedgefield? It manufactures high-radiation detector material ingots that are shipped to the USA, attracting US import duty incorporating the price for worldwide sale, with the waste coming back to the UK for re-manufacture, attracting further UK import duty. The removal of those duties would clearly support high-value jobs in Sedgefield and increase the global competitiveness of an export-led UK business.

Greg Hands: I thank my hon. Friend for that excellent question on behalf of his constituency company, and I can tell him that the US and the UK have a shared ambition to improve trade for our SME-focused economies on both sides of the Atlantic, to help companies such as Kromek. There are three specific areas we are looking at. First, we want to reduce or eliminate tariffs. Secondly, we will have a wide-reaching SME chapter. Thirdly, we are also looking at provisions on reimported goods as well. Those provisions will benefit around 32,000 UK SMEs that already export to the US, such as Kromek, but also future SMEs. That will grow that trade, which will suit our bustling and improving SME sector.

Rob Butler [V]: The trade agreement with the European Union is absolutely fantastic for our country as a newly sovereign nation, and it comes on top of deals already covering more than 60 countries. Can my right hon. Friend tell the House how he intends to go further still and secure opportunities in the Asia-Pacific region, which would particularly benefit small businesses in my constituency of Aylesbury, but also those across the UK?

Greg Hands: We are seeking an SME chapter in all our future free trade agreements. SME chapters are an excellent way of assisting companies to navigate a free trade agreement. They distil information and make it easier, particularly for companies without expertise in trade agreements, which is generally the case for SMEs. In Asia-Pacific, we aim to include such chapters. We have already included one in an agreement with Japan, and we aim to include them in agreements with Australia, New Zealand and, of course, the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership. We are aiming to do that to benefit SMEs in constituencies such as my hon. Friend's in Aylesbury.

Food and Drink Exports

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): What steps her Department has taken to promote food and drink exports from across the UK. [910746]

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Elizabeth Truss): We are launching a new food and drink export campaign this year, which will encourage British businesses to take advantage of the deals we have struck, covering 63 countries around the world. As part of our Japan deal, we will be putting forward 77 geographical indications to the Japanese system, including Welsh lamb.

Simon Baynes [V]: The Prime Minister's Brexit deal is a great achievement, but could my right hon. Friend help with problems being experienced by companies delivering goods to Northern Ireland, such as dairy wholesaler Spear UK in Llandrillo in my constituency

of Clwyd South, which saw delays last week due to additional paperwork and permanent extra costs for the customs agent and veterinary oversight?

Elizabeth Truss: My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster gave a statement on this issue yesterday, and he is working hard with the Brexit business taskforce to deal with those issues. We also have the trader support scheme for Northern Ireland. I am pleased to say that freight volumes for Northern Ireland ports are at normal levels for this time of year, and there are no significant queues. Supermarkets are reporting healthy levels of supplies, but I certainly will pass on my hon. Friend's issue to the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster to ensure that it is resolved.

Mr Speaker: Let us head to Scotland to Scottish National party spokesperson Stewart Hosie with the first of two questions.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP) [V]: The Secretary of State was copied in to a letter to the Business Secretary from Vicky Leigh-Pearson, the sales director at John Ross Jr, Aberdeen, salmon producers and exporters. It described in excoriating detail the "barrage of useless information" on Brexit, which added no value or clarity for such food and drink exporting businesses. Would it not be better to fix the problems at the UK-EU border, where real exports take place, rather than make vague promises about future promotional campaigns?

Elizabeth Truss: I observe that the hon. Gentleman did not support a deal, so effectively he wanted no deal for the people of the United Kingdom. I think it is a bit rich of him to raise issues when no deal would have been very, very tricky for the exporters he is talking about. Given that £200 million was given to the Scottish Government to prepare to minimise disruption, I suggest he takes up the issue with Nicola Sturgeon to see how that money has been spent to help Scottish exporters.

Stewart Hosie: That was possibly the worst case of deflection I have ever seen, even from a Tory. The Brexit advice on offer to businesses such as John Ross Jr, which has an exemplary 30-year record in exporting, "has fallen woefully short when it comes to one of the most important commercial issues of our time."

Instead of vague promises about future campaigns, pathetic attempts at deflection and playing rather silly politics, would it not be better to fix the problems at the UK-EU border, where real exports happen, to protect real jobs and businesses?

Elizabeth Truss: My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster is working very hard with the Brexit business taskforce to make sure that disruption is minimised and businesses are given support. It is perfectly reasonable for me to raise the £200 million that has been given to the Scottish Government and how they are spending it, and the hon. Gentleman's silence speaks volumes.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab) [V]: Not enough vets to inspect Scottish fish, not enough customs agents to process border forms and not enough time for exporters to adopt new rules of origin—it is no good the Secretary of State saying that the delays are temporary or promising

compensation with money that has been already allocated to modernise the fishing industry, as the Prime Minister did yesterday. The Government have failed to prepare for the new arrangements at the border, so is it any wonder that a company such as John Ross Jr says that the Government have thrown them in the sea “without a life jacket”?

Elizabeth Truss: I am not quite sure what the question was, but I have been clear that the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster is running the Brexit business taskforce and that we are seeing disruption minimised and businesses given the support they need. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that there is an urgent question immediately after this Question Time specifically on the fisheries issue, in which he will no doubt want to participate.

Brazil Trade Agreement: Environmental Standards

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): What discussions she has had with her Brazilian counterpart on enhancing environmental standards as part of a bilateral trade agreement. [910747]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mr Ranil Jayawardena): Britain will not sacrifice her high standards of environmental protection in any future free trade agreements. At present, we do not have a trade agreement with Brazil, but we are clear that more trade does not need to come at the expense of our values. The Secretary of State and I raised the pressing issue of deforestation most recently on 11 November at our joint economic and trade committee with Brazil.

Kerry McCarthy [V]: I thank the Minister for his response, but in recent correspondence I have had with the Brazilian ambassador, he has refused even to acknowledge that deforestation is an issue in the Amazon. We have also seen recent reports in the press about terrible working conditions on Brazilian beef farms, which have been described as akin to modern slavery. What more can be done to ensure not only that these concerns are raised in discussions with Brazil but that any future bilateral trade deal is conditional on Brazil taking action to stop the abuse of workers and the deforestation?

Mr Jayawardena: The hon. Lady is right: there is, of course, more that can be done, which is why the United Kingdom has already committed £259 million to Brazil through its international climate finance programme to tackle deforestation. For example, the early movers programme rewards pioneers in forest conservation, and another programme led by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has protected the clearance of something like 430,000 acres in Brazil.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP) [V]: As we all know, Scotland opposed leaving the European Union, and leaving the European Union is going to cost the UK about 4.9% of GDP. Many are concerned that a trade deal with Brazil will be a threat to UK poultry and meat production. Will the Minister ensure that lower meat production standards do not get on the table in any way, shape or form? What is the GDP gain of a deal with Brazil? Do the Government

have that figure, or is it similar to the Australia trade deal, which is projected to be 245 times smaller than the Brexit damage that the Tory Government have foisted upon the UK?

Mr Jayawardena: I thank the Chairman of the International Trade Committee for his question. I can be clear that we are firmly committed to upholding our high environmental, food safety and animal welfare standards now that we are outside the EU. Indeed, we have the agility and flexibility to enhance them where we believe that that is right. We can also go further on trade. That includes recently opening new opportunities for fish by securing approval from Brazil for seven new British fisheries facilities, which means that companies can now sell high-quality British fish to an import market that was worth almost £1 billion in 2019.

Continuity Trade Agreements

Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con): What progress she has made in securing continuity trade agreements. [910748]

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Elizabeth Truss): We have agreed trade deals covering 63 countries plus the EU, accounting for £885 billion of UK trade. No other country has ever negotiated so many deals simultaneously.

Claire Coutinho [V]: I commend the Secretary of State for her work securing the most ambitious digital free trade provisions anywhere in the world. The digital economy is worth £150 billion to the UK economy, and it is growing five times faster than the rest of the economy. Could the Secretary of State outline the work that she is doing, to update businesses on these exciting new provisions, so that they can make the most of the new opportunities?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to point out that digital trade is vital, and the UK is a world leader in technology. Our Japan deal goes well beyond the EU-Japan deal in areas such as the free flow of data, the commitment to uphold the principles of net neutrality and the ban on data localisation. We are negotiating similar provisions with Australia, New Zealand and Singapore, and we are looking to accede to the CPTPP, which has a very strong digital and data chapter. We also have a trade advisory group involving leading figures from the tech industry so we can make sure we have the most up-to-date information when we are negotiating these deals.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): It has now been 14 days since the provisional trade agreement between the UK and Cameroon entered into force, yet Parliament has still not even seen that agreement, let alone had the chance to examine, debate or approve it. While I fully understand the reasons for that, does the Secretary of State understand why Members of all parties believe that this episode just illustrates why—in fact, it is the latest illustration of why—scrutiny procedures need to be improved, which is the reason many will be voting for changes to them next Tuesday?

Elizabeth Truss: I like to say that scrutiny starts at home, so I suggest the right hon. Lady starts with her colleague, the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas), who presided over the EU's signing of the CARIFORUM deal 13 years ago, which is still being provisionally applied. I am not quite sure why the right hon. Lady does not ask for a debate on that. *[Laughter.]*

Emily Thornberry: These are serious matters. Cameroon has become, in the last three years, one of the most abusive, repressive and murderous regimes in the world today. We all know that that did not stop the Secretary of State reaching a trade agreement with it, but we do not even know what, if anything, the trade agreement says on this issue. Again, does the Secretary of State understand why Members on all sides of this House believe that there is a need for new laws, next Tuesday, obliging the Government to take proper account of human rights when negotiating and ratifying new trade agreements?

Elizabeth Truss: I had hoped that the right hon. Lady would have welcomed our announcement earlier this week on the action we are taking on forced labour in Xinjiang and making sure that Britain upholds its values when trading internationally. I would ask her to consider some of her previous actions, such as sharing a platform with Hamas and refusing to criticise Fidel Castro's abhorrent human rights abuses. It is a bit much being lectured by a Labour Member on human rights, given her past record.

Mr Speaker: Can I just say to the Secretary of State that I expect better of her answer? That was just way off beam. In fairness, you are a much better Secretary of State than that, and I do expect better.

Inward Investment

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con): What comparative assessment she has made of the level of inward investment into (a) the UK and (b) other European countries. [910749]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): The DIT's inward investment goal is to maintain the UK's position as the No. 1 holder of foreign investment in Europe. That is why I am delighted to say that, according to the latest Office for National Statistics figures, the UK's inward foreign direct investment stock stood at £1.6 trillion at the end of 2019. According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development—the global equivalent of the ONS—the UK maintained its No. 1 status for FDI stock in Europe at the end of that year.

Brendan Clarke-Smith [V]: What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that inward investment supports the levelling up of areas such as Bassetlaw?

Graham Stuart: What an excellent question. My Department is committed to ensuring that exports and investment bolster our levelling-up agenda. That is why we operate a key account management programme, to support existing investors in priority levelling-up areas. D2N2 LEP—it sounds like something from "Star Trek", but it is my hon. Friend's local enterprise partnership—is currently receiving funding under that programme to identify foreign owned companies across the LEP area,

including in Bassetlaw, which can be assisted with growth plans precisely to retain an increased number of jobs. Since March, we have also placed seven new officers in key markets overseas, who are specifically tasked with promoting investment opportunities in the midlands, not least in Bassetlaw.

Middle East: Trade

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con) [V]: What steps she is taking to strengthen the UK's trade relationship with the Middle East. [910750]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mr Ranil Jayawardena): Britain has strong bilateral trading relationships with our friends in the middle east and a clear ambition to deepen them. That is why we have launched a joint trade and investment review with the Gulf Cooperation Council, with which total trade stood at almost £41 billion in the year to June 2020. We continue our work with other parts of the region too, particularly where we have trade agreements and are seeking to maximise new opportunities.

Robert Halfon [V]: The recent report from the all-party group on the Kurdistan Region in Iraq, which I chair, identifies opportunities for British bodies in energy, solar power, film production, higher education and agriculture, including quality pomegranates from Halabja, and it states that the Government should organise a second official trade mission once covid allows. Will the Minister talk with his colleagues, the Kurdistan Regional Government, and the APPG to consider how such a trade mission could boost investment and trade with our allies, who constantly seek British expertise, goods and services?

Mr Jayawardena: Sadly, such travel is somewhat restricted at this moment in time, but my right hon. Friend is right to highlight the opportunities across the whole middle east region. For instance, in the education sector, which I know is a particular passion of his, my Department has supported companies to win more than 30 contracts in the middle east, worth more than £58 million over the past year. I look forward to working with my right hon. Friend to take that forward.

Free Trade Agreements

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con) [V]: What steps her Department has taken to help ensure that businesses in the north-west can benefit from future free trade agreements. [910751]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): I thank the distinguished trade envoy for his excellent question. My Department is turbo-charging efforts to help northern businesses take advantage of our trade deals and ensure that the benefits of FTAs are shared across the United Kingdom. Since March we have recruited an additional 30 international trade advisers, and 14 overseas representatives just for the northern powerhouse. We founded the Export Academy, equipping northern businesses with the knowledge, skills and tools that they need to create an export plan and, more importantly, to implement it. Since 2016, the DIT northern powerhouse team has led 83 trade missions to 23 countries, supporting 1,638 companies. My hon. Friend will be pleased to hear that covid-19 has not stopped us, and that 272 northern companies have

benefited from nine virtual missions that the northern powerhouse team has delivered since April 2020. Five further such missions are planned for delivery by the end of March 2021.

Mark Menzies [V]: I am delighted to have recently joined the parliamentary export programme, which is a DIT-led initiative that focuses on promoting international trade. Fylde, just like Chorley, is home to numerous SMEs that currently do not export their goods and services, but would be well placed to do so. What support and advice will be made available to businesses that are looking to begin exporting and play their part in post-Brexit, global Britain?

Graham Stuart: I warmly welcome my hon. Friend to the parliamentary export programme and thank him for all he is doing for businesses in Fylde. In addition to the support I just outlined, I launched the export growth plan in October, with a £38 million internationalisation fund to provide grants for businesses to export. In December, I launched the UK Export Finance general export facility, providing working capital to exporting SMEs—the first product of its kind and available from all the major banks. In 2019, we were the only top 10 exporting country in the world to grow exports. All I can say is that we do not plan to let up.

Free Trade Agreements

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): What steps her Department has taken to help ensure that businesses in the Coast to Capital local enterprise partnership area can benefit from future free trade agreements. [910752]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): We are determined that all regions of the United Kingdom should benefit from free trade agreements. Our English network of international trade advisers includes 30 giving export support in the south-east of England, all of whom have been trained to help companies take advantage of FTAs. We have a range of online resources, including country-by-country guides and tools on great.gov.uk such as “Find an online marketplace” and “Find export opportunities”, in addition to the wide range of webinars that the Department provides.

Henry Smith [V]: The Coast to Capital local enterprise partnership is soon to submit a freeport bid for the Manor Royal industrial area south of Gatwick airport. May I have an assurance from my hon. Friend that he will liaise with our right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer in support of this excellent initiative?

Graham Stuart: I would not want to tread on my hon. Friend’s toes. As he understands, the selection process is ongoing and it will be decided by the Treasury, but obviously we are working very closely with the Chancellor and the Treasury team, precisely to ensure that the opportunities for freeports are assigned to the best possible places and that all the benefits that they can bring are realised, for the benefit of constituents such as my hon. Friend’s.

Free Trade Agreement: Australia

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): What progress she has made on securing a free trade agreement with Australia. [910753]

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Elizabeth Truss): We have made good progress, and we are about to go into the third round of talks with Australia next month. I will be speaking to my counterpart, Dan Tehan, next week in advance of that, and we will be fighting to cut tariffs on vital British goods such as ceramics, which face a 5% tariff into Australia.

Aaron Bell [V]: I thank my right hon. Friend for her answer and for everything that she and her team, and her negotiators, did last year to get continuity trade agreements for Newcastle-under-Lyme exporters such as Doulton Water Filters, which I met shortly before Christmas. For all our exporters, will my right hon. Friend set out how an agreement with Australia would also facilitate our accession to the CPTPP, which is one of the most vibrant markets in the world and would give us even more opportunities in the future?

Elizabeth Truss: A deal with Australia will be another important step towards CPTPP, where we will be negotiating a market access schedule with Australia. It is a high-standards, rules-based agreement covering £9 trillion of GDP and, importantly, it removes tariffs on 95% of goods. It has a strong data and digital chapter and it will mean more opportunities for exporters in Newcastle-under-Lyme.

Free Trade Agreements

Fay Jones (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): What steps her Department has taken to help ensure that (a) farmers and (b) food producers in Wales can benefit from future free trade agreements. [910754]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mr Ranil Jayawardena): Global Britain’s trade agreements will benefit food and drink producers and farmers by driving up growth and opening new markets to them. Just in 2019, Wales exported £123 million-worth of meat products globally, so a future trade deal with the US and others could reduce barriers. A deal with the US alone could boost the Welsh economy by £154 million, helping to create more jobs in my hon. Friend’s constituency.

Fay Jones [V]: On Christmas day, a local sheep farmer knocked on my door to give me a Christmas present—a box of swedes—as a thank you for the Prime Minister reaching our historic free trade agreement with the EU. Sheep farmers in Brecon and Radnorshire have warmly welcomed the deal with the EU, the largest market for Welsh lamb, but my farmers are not prepared to stand still; opening new markets through rewarding trade deals is essential to future-proofing the sheep sector. Will the Minister confirm that the Government will look to give sheep farmers across Brecon and Radnorshire every possible opportunity to get their lamb across the world?

Mr Jayawardena: My hon. Friend is a great champion of the farming industry in her constituency and across Wales, and I can assure her that the Government are committed to securing future free trade agreements that will open up markets for farmers in Wales. Indeed, the United Kingdom-Japan free trade agreement is particularly beneficial, as it will protect Welsh lamb under the new agreement on geographical indicators. Sheep farmers such as Rhug Estate have already welcomed the opportunity to export their high-quality lamb to Japan.

Educational Technology: Exports

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): What assessment she has made of the export potential in the UK educational technology sector. [910755]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): The latest data gathered from a survey by the British Educational Suppliers Association indicates that UK EdTech exports are worth £170 million a year. That is expected to increase in light of the pandemic, which has lifted demand for EdTech products and services. The UK is well placed to take advantage of this trend as the fourth largest market globally. More important than the market value is the difference that good educational technology can make.

Damian Hinds [V]: My hon. Friend will recall that, when we worked together on the international education strategy, EdTech was a key export growth area—and that was before, as he mentions, the focus that the pandemic put on its role. What can be done across Government to maximise the export potential of EdTech for the future?

Graham Stuart: My right hon. Friend is quite right. It was in his time as Secretary of State for Education that we built much closer ties between our Departments to make sure we could promote educational exports. He is also right to highlight the pandemic's impact on EdTech. We are working with BESA, the British Educational Suppliers Association, and the Department for Education, his old Department, on a major EdTech event this month, which will connect companies with overseas buyers.

More activity is planned for later in the year in several key markets, supported by the international trade champion, Sir Steve Smith. That post, of course, came out of the work that my right hon. Friend did to develop the international education strategy. He will be pleased to know that we will soon be launching a refreshed international education strategy, in collaboration with the Department for Education and with the support of other Government Departments, that includes provisions to maximise EdTech's export potential.

Services: EU Relationship

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): What discussions she plans to have with her EU counterparts on developing the relationship on services. [910768]

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): What discussions she plans to have with her EU counterparts on developing the relationship on services. [910769]

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): What discussions she plans to have with her EU counterparts on developing the relationship on services. [910770]

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): The trade co-operation agreement secures continued market access across key service sectors, including both professional and business services. The agreement also includes a commitment to review the services provisions with a view to making further improvements, along with a specific

joint declaration on regulatory co-operation in financial services. Specifics will be taken forward by the Cabinet Office and Taskforce Europe.

Douglas Chapman [V]: Within a day of leaving the EU, shares worth billions of euros normally traded in the City of London flooded out of the EU to other European capitals such as Paris and Amsterdam. One trader told the *Financial Times* that this was a “stunning own goal” and only the beginning of the financial sector's post-Brexit decline. We know that in Scotland seafood markets are already being decimated, but what is the Minister's assessment of the damage Brexit will do to the UK's financial sector and how many own goals can we expect in the future?

Greg Hands: The memorandum of understanding on financial services ensures financial stability and consumer protection, and we look forward to that being negotiated. I was not surprised by this question, but I was a little bit surprised that the hon. Gentleman was the one asking it. It is not that long ago that he said:

“Leaving the European Union without a deal in place is an act of economic self-harm”.

But that is precisely what he voted for on 30 December.

Deidre Brock [V]: The Prime Minister admitted that the deal is not up to the job on trade and services, and Brussels has made it clear that access will be restricted further if there is divergence from the EU's standards. Is it the Government's intention to give up access to that market, or will the UK remain wedded to the EU's regulatory framework?

Greg Hands: I have long experience in this space, having been a Treasury Minister, and there are of course advantages to the UK being able to set its own regulatory regime for financial services as the biggest financial services marketplace in Europe. I think the hon. Lady is wrong to characterise the treaty—she voted in favour of no deal—as not being good for services. There are good provisions on business travellers, excellent provisions on legal services, and very, very good provisions on digital and data. I am a little bit surprised that she is not more supportive of the deal.

Richard Thomson [V]: [*Inaudible.*]

Mr Speaker: You are on mute, Richard; press the button.

Richard Thomson: [*Inaudible.*]

Mr Speaker: Sorry, but we are going to have to move on.

UK-EU Trade and Co-operation Agreement

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the effect of the UK-EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement on the UK's position in global trade. [910756]

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Elizabeth Truss): The agreement that we have struck with the EU is great for the UK. It delivers on our promise to the British people and takes back control of our laws, our borders and our money. It proves that we can succeed as an independent trading nation, and builds on the deal that we have struck covering 63 countries around the world.

Kevin Brennan [V]: I was genuinely interested in what the Secretary of State would say, because so far none of the 30-plus free trade deals that she has rolled over with non-EU countries since 2019 is actually set to deliver any increase in exports compared with what was previously forecast. According to her own economic impact assessments, even the Japan trade deal, which she has lauded, will result in only a £2.6 billion increase in UK exports, not the £4.3 billion forecast inside the EU. Can she explain—preferably without reverting to wishful thinking, personal attacks or party political rants—exactly how Britain is going to be better off?

Elizabeth Truss: I am interested to hear the hon. Gentleman's political advice there. I note that he did not vote for a deal with the EU, even though he previously said that no deal was unacceptable. The figures that he is quoting on Japan from the EU are crude figures that are completely out of date and were created from data before the financial crisis in 2008. The fact is that the Japan deal that we have struck goes further and faster in areas such as data and digital, the creative industries, and food and drink—all areas where the UK has a comparative advantage. There are huge opportunities ahead, and I ask the hon. Gentleman to embrace them.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Over the last two years, the Government have placed, as the Secretary of State tells us frequently, more than 30 new trade agreements before the House. Every single one of them, of course, has been accompanied by an economic impact assessment.

The Secretary of State's October agreement with Japan set a new standard for these documents, with over 100 pages analysing the impact of the deal on UK exports, jobs, business and growth. May I simply ask the Secretary of State, when are the Government going to publish the economic impact assessment for the UK's trade agreement with the European Union?

Elizabeth Truss: The right hon. Lady will be well aware that the Department for International Trade is not responsible for negotiating the agreement with the European Union. That is a matter for Taskforce Europe, which has provided full data to this House. The House voted for the deal—including, I am delighted to see, the right hon. Lady.

Emily Thornberry: I was not asking whether the Secretary of State was responsible; I was just thinking that, since she was in the Cabinet, she might know when the impact assessment was going to be published.

The reality is that we only need to watch the news to see the devastating economic damage being done to businesses across our country—especially the Scottish fishing industry—as a result of the new rules facing our exporters and the shocking way in which they are being implemented. Can the Secretary of State explain the logic? Why have the Government published full economic impact assessments for the trade agreements signed last month with Moldova and North Macedonia, but not for our trade agreement with the European Union?

Elizabeth Truss: The trade agreement with the European Union is something that the House has already voted on and supported, and which has happened. It is one of

the largest agreements ever struck, duty free and quota free on products covering huge amounts of the British economy.

I encourage the right hon. Lady to move forward and focus on the areas for which the Department for International Trade has responsibility—namely, the 63 countries that we have covered with new trade deals, and our aspirations to strike trade deals with the US, New Zealand and Australia.

Human Rights Clauses: Trade Agreements

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with UK trade partners on inserting clauses on human rights in future trade agreements. [910757]

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with UK trade partners on inserting clauses on human rights in future trade agreements. [910760]

Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with UK trade partners on inserting clauses on human rights in future trade agreements. [910775]

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): The United Kingdom has long promoted its values globally. We are clear that more trade does not have to come at the expense of our values. While our approach to agreements will vary between partners, it will always allow this Government to open discussions on issues, including on rights and responsibilities.

Margaret Greenwood [V]: Following on from the Minister's response, successive UK Governments have believed in the principle that all new trade treaties should contain clauses allowing those treaties to be suspended if the other party engages in serious abuses of human rights, yet the UK recently signed new treaties with Singapore, Vietnam and Turkey, none of which had those clauses, despite ongoing concerns about the records of those countries. Can the Minister please explain why?

Greg Hands: The hon. Lady might be misunderstanding the nature of the continuity programme for rolling over existing agreements. I point out that, on Turkey, the underlying agreement dates from 1963, and there were no human rights clauses in that agreement, but that does not mean to say that we do not have a robust discussion with Turkey on human rights. The EU-Vietnam framework agreement was separate and was not necessary to achieve trade continuity, but again we have a good dialogue with Vietnam on human rights. The UK and Singapore have agreed a UK-Singapore political joint statement to reflect our close partnership. Once that is signed, it will be published on gov.uk.

Liz Twist: We have spent much time in this Chamber quite rightly talking about the fate of the Uyghurs and China's treatment of them. Does the Minister agree that that issue needs to be dealt with in any trade deal, to ensure that we are not endorsing such genocidal actions?

Greg Hands: I am extremely sympathetic to the hon. Lady's question. The Foreign Secretary delivered an extensive statement on this topic on Tuesday. Of course,

the UK is not negotiating a free trade agreement with China. However, the Foreign Secretary announced on Tuesday a review of export controls, financial penalties for organisations not complying with the Modern Slavery Act 2015, strengthening the overseas business risk guidance and making sure that the Government have the information we need to exclude suppliers complicit in human rights violations in Xinjiang.

Kate Osborne [V]: May I ask the Minister very simply why he feels it was appropriate to roll over a trade agreement with Egypt, a country that routinely detains and executes political opponents and religious minorities, persecutes its lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community and suppresses democratic freedoms, and why no effort was made to strengthen the human rights provisions in that agreement?

Greg Hands: The continuity programme is all about rolling over the deals that are there. I do not believe that there was any diminution of human rights provisions in the agreement with Egypt, or certainly of the effect of those provisions. We have a regular dialogue with Egypt on these issues. There is an extremely difficult internal security situation in Egypt, which the hon. Lady will know has affected British nationals directly as well. It is careful to get that balance right in all our dialogues with countries such as Egypt.

Topical Questions

[910804] **Alan Mak (Havant) (Con):** If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Elizabeth Truss): In under two years, we have agreed trade deals covering 63 countries plus the EU, accounting for £885 billion of UK trade. This is unprecedented; no other country has ever negotiated so many trade deals simultaneously. In 2021, we will add to these deals: negotiations are already under way with the United States, Australia and New Zealand, and our planned accession to the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership will hitch Britain to the fastest-growing markets around the world.

Alan Mak [V]: Can my right hon. Friend update the House on the UK's accession to the CPTPP and explain how exporters from my constituency could expect to benefit?

Elizabeth Truss: Accession to the CPTPP is a priority for this Government and a key part of our trade negotiation programme. We aim to make our formal notification of our intent to accede soon. This agreement will give huge opportunities for British business to export more goods. We already export more goods to the CPTPP countries than to China. For example, 95% of goods are tariff-free under the agreement, and the strong data and digital provisions will really help British tech firms.

[910808] **Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab) [V]:** The Prime Minister promised barrier-free trade with the EU post Brexit, but local firms that now find costly obstacles in VAT issues are finding the opposite, so could the Government please rectify the situation for firms that import from outside the EU to export to within it, because small British businesses have become less attractive than our EU competitors?

Returns mean ruinous, cash flow-killing charges for a reverse transaction. Some of these firms have had to diversify after lockdown shut their shops, and many are on the brink of bankruptcy.

Elizabeth Truss: The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), is running the Brexit business taskforce to ensure that the additional processes required of businesses are clear and to give businesses the support they need to be able to trade in the new environment.

[910805] **Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con) [V]:** The English language is arguably one of our top exports of all time, and English language schools are a vital part of the local economy in my destination constituency of Eastbourne. Can my hon. Friend assure my language schools, hospitality businesses and host families that Ministers are working with the sector to ensure its survival in these difficult days and working on plans for its success when it is once again safe for language learners to travel?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): No one in this House has done more than my hon. Friend to champion the English language sector under the pressures of covid. I congratulate her on today's question and on the debate that she led in, I think, July, to which I had the honour of replying.

We are determined to champion the interests of the English language sector. That is why it is a key member of the education sector advisory group, which I co-chair with my hon. Friend the Minister for Universities. We are determined across Government to ensure that it can access Government schemes for support. My hon. Friend is also right to say that we should look ahead, and that is why we have produced an enterprise management incentive suppliers catalogue for China and are working to replicate that for growing markets such as Indonesia and Brazil. We have to help those businesses to survive today, and we have to put in place support for the future so that they can grow once again and be such an important part of our education sector and, indeed, our wider cultural offer to the world.

[910806] **Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con) [V]:** We were told that, as an independent nation, we could not get a free trade deal with the European Union, but we did. We have also signed more than 60 additional trade deals with nations all around the world, and that is undoubtedly a magnificent achievement for the world's fifth largest economy. Can my right hon. Friend tell me how these trade deals impact us and what their potential value is to the UK economy?

Elizabeth Truss: The trade deals that we have secured are worth £885 billion of trade. What trade means is jobs. It means opportunities for firms to export abroad. It means strong supply chains for businesses across the United Kingdom. The FTAs that we have secured mean that UK traders will continue to enjoy preferential access to trade that covers 63% of UK trade. In the case of our deal with Japan, that deal goes further and faster, and that will bring more benefits to our tech companies, to our food and drink industry and, of course, to our fantastic creative industry.

[910816] **Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP) [V]: Yesterday, the Prime Minister claimed that his trade deal allowed UK musicians and performers to “go play” in EU countries for 90 out of 180 days, but that is total nonsense unless they are supposed to play for free. What will the Department for International Trade do to fix the tangle of visas and permits that musicians, artists and performers have been landed in?

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): This has attracted some attention. I would remind the hon. Member that he voted for no deal on 30 December. I would also refer him to the article written by the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport in the *New Musical Express* this week, in which he said that the EU offer on this unfortunately fell short of the UK’s proposals and would not have enabled touring by musicians. He said:

“The UK pushed for a more ambitious agreement with the EU on the temporary movement of business travellers, which would have covered musicians and others, but our proposals were rejected by the EU”.

[910807] **Mark Fletcher** (Bolsover) (Con): Now that we have delivered on all our Brexit promises, exporters across the Bolsover constituency are keen to take advantage of new opportunities and grow in new markets. So will my hon. Friend tell me what opportunities will come from new and better trade deals with Mexico and Canada for businesses across the midlands?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mr Ranil Jayawardena): I thank my hon. Friend for that question. He is a great champion of business in his constituency, and I can tell him that the deals with Canada and Mexico give vital certainty to businesses across the midlands, which export goods and services worth about £15 billion, in key sectors such as automotive, manufacturing and food and drink. I know that these opportunities, and new ones, will be taken up by businesses—manufacturers and others—on the Holmewood business park in Shirebrook and across the Bolsover constituency.

[910819] **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab)[V]: Data is the lifeblood of modern economies, but the data provisions in the UK-Japan deal, which Ministers have been boasting about this morning, make it less likely that the EU will grant us the vital adequacy agreement that our researchers and businesses need in just a few months. So can Ministers explain how these contradictions are to be resolved?

Elizabeth Truss: I observe to the hon. Gentleman that Japan has data adequacy with the EU and it is also part of the comprehensive and progressive trans-Pacific partnership, which has a strong digital and data chapter. So it is absolutely reasonable that we should be able to have both and be successful.

T9. [910809] **Tom Hunt** (Ipswich) (Con): This is largely a matter for the Treasury, but I just want assurances from the Government that when it comes to a freeport bid and the levelling-up agenda, which is at the heart of these new freeports, they will keep in mind the huge beneficial impact that being a freeport would have for Felixstowe. It employs 6,000 of my constituents, and there are deprived constituencies around Felixstowe, in

Clacton and Ipswich. So I would like a commitment from the Government that that is very much at the centre of their thinking on these freeports.

Graham Stuart: My hon. Friend is right to advocate so passionately on behalf of his constituents, particularly those who need that opportunity and that levelling up. This is precisely what the levelling-up agenda and the freeport programme are about, and we are determined that the benefits of our free trade agenda should be shared right across the country, including in Ipswich. Freeports will attract new investors and drive trade and exports, all of which will help to regenerate communities across the UK, through high-skilled jobs and new infrastructure. It is so important that we work together as a House to champion business and jobs. Forget there being a division in the Labour party, its Front-Bench International Trade team could not—

Mr Speaker: Order, Mr Stuart. This questions session has not been good, because I am beginning to worry that we have very good answers to those on one side of the Chamber but the answers to those on the other mean that they are not getting the respect they deserve. In fact, on one occasion we had, “No, it is not our responsibility”, but then suddenly when another Member asked, we had, “It is our responsibility”. I want us to be concise in our treatment and the way we deal with all Members of this House. They are representing constituencies, and I expect them to get full and thorough answers, and not the political games, on all sides, that seem to be being played.

[910826] **Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab) [V]: Small businesses in my constituency are struggling to cope with the complex bureaucracy regarding all aspects of trade since leaving the EU, from navigating immigration rules to dealing with export paperwork. So does the Secretary of State support the Federation of Small Businesses’ calls for the rapid introduction of vouchers worth £3,000 that small firms can spend on the tech, training and advice needed to get through this huge change to their business practice?

Greg Hands: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question—he is right to raise issues on behalf of small businesses in his constituency. The Government are in constant dialogue with business representative organisations such as the Federation of Small Businesses, for example at the Brexit business taskforce chaired by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. The Government have of course provided an enormous amount of funding to make sure that businesses are ready for the end of the transition period.

[910811] **Julian Sturdy** (York Outer) (Con) [V]: Given the imminent return of the amended Trade Bill to the Chamber and the regaining of control over trade negotiations from Brussels after 46 years, does the Minister agree that ratification of new trade agreements should rest with elected representatives in this House, not Government bureaucrats?

Greg Hands: Since we left the EU a year ago, no bureaucrats will ratify our trade agreements. The ratification of future free trade agreements will take place only once this Parliament has had the opportunity to scrutinise the detail of any trade deal and any necessary implementing

legislation. We believe that our system of parliamentary scrutiny compares favourably with that of other Westminster-style democracies such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

[910828] **Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab) [V]: We all know the tremendous additional challenges that our businesses face in exporting goods to the EU, nowhere more so than the chemicals industry, which supports thousands of jobs on Teesside. The ideal situation would be for the UK to remain part of the EU REACH—registration, evaluation, authorisation and restriction of chemicals—framework, thus accessing the services of the European Chemicals Agency, but Ministers seem to think differently and that could cost us £1 billion a year. How will the Government protect our chemicals industry going forward?

Greg Hands: Our chemicals industry is extremely important and we are well aware of the issues in the industry with all its trade partners. I remind the hon. Gentleman that the EU deal is the responsibility of the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, but I am sure that the chemicals industry will make its voice heard at the Brexit business taskforce. The Government stand ready to assist the industry, which, as the hon. Gentleman rightly says, is vital for our future prosperity.

[910812] **Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con) [V]: Thirsk and Malton is very lucky to have Karro and Cranswick—pork producers that employ hundreds of people at each of their sites—in the constituency. Their

trade has been hit by the 25% tariff applied to exports of pork to the USA. What progress have we made to resolve that?

Elizabeth Truss: We are working very hard to de-escalate that tariff conflict and reach a negotiated settlement. I have been in discussions with the US and the EU and I will take up the matter on an urgent basis when the new US trade representative is confirmed in due course.

[910813] **Ben Everitt** (Milton Keynes North) (Con): This week, Milton Keynes got yet another Government grant for a 5G piloting scheme. It is great for connectivity in our digital and technical sector. What plans has the Department to grow that sector internationally so that Milton Keynes can lead the world in digital and tech?

Greg Hands: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. We are all well aware of the important role that Milton Keynes plays in technology innovation, electric vehicles and other transport technologies in particular, as well as other areas. That is why the UK is seeking to minimise the barriers to digital trade in particular, going further in the UK-Japan deal. We want to ensure that the UK is at the forefront of global dialogue on policy issues, for example, at the World Trade Organisation.

Mr Speaker: I am suspending the House for three minutes to enable the necessary arrangements for the next business to be made.

10.33 am

Sitting suspended.

EU Trade and Co-operation Agreement: Fishing Industry

10.37 am

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if he will make a statement on the consequences of the EU trade and co-operation agreement as it applies to the fishing industry.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): As hon. Members will know, before Christmas the UK and the EU concluded a new trade and co-operation agreement, which established tariff-free trade in all goods and, among other things, sets a new relationship with the EU on fisheries. Before turning to the specifics of that agreement, I should briefly set the wider context.

The withdrawal agreement that was agreed by this House in January last year established the United Kingdom as an independent coastal state. Over the course of the last year we have taken our independent seat at the regional fisheries management organisations, including the North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission and the North Atlantic Fisheries Organisation. In September, we reached a partnership agreement with Norway—our most important partner on fishing interests, and with whom we have responsibility for shared stocks in the North sea.

We have also developed new bilateral arrangements with our other north-east Atlantic neighbours, including the Faroes, Greenland and Iceland. We have recently commenced annual bilateral fisheries negotiations with the Faroes in relation to access to one another's waters, and a UK-Norway-EU trilateral is about to begin to agree fishing opportunities on shared stocks in the North sea. There will also be a UK-EU bilateral negotiation on fishing opportunities for the current year in remaining areas. For the first time in almost 50 years, the UK has a seat at the table and represents its own interests in those important negotiations.

The trade and co-operation agreement establishes an initial multi-annual agreement on quota, sharing and access, covering five and a half years. It ends relative stability as the basis for sharing stocks. Under the agreement, we have given an undertaking to give the EU access to our waters on similar terms as now and, in return, it has agreed to relinquish approximately 25% of the quota that it previously caught in our waters under the EU's relative stability arrangement. That means that we move from being able to catch somewhat over half the fish in our waters to two thirds of the fish in our waters at the end of the multi-annual agreement. The transfer of quota is front-loaded, with the EU giving up 15% in year 1. On North sea cod, we have an increase from 47% to 57%. On Celtic sea haddock, our share has moved from 10% to 20%. On North sea hake, we secured an uplift from 18% to 54%, and on West of Scotland anglerfish, we have an increase from 31% to 45%. After the five-and-a-half-year agreement, we are able to change access and sharing arrangements further. The EU, for its part, will also be able to apply tariffs on fish exports in proportion to any withdrawal of access.

Although we recognise that some sectors of the fishing industry had hoped for a larger uplift, and, indeed, the Government argued throughout for a settlement that

would have been closer to zonal attachment, the agreement does, nevertheless, mark a significant step in the right direction. To support the UK industry through this initial five and a half years, the Prime Minister announced, just before Christmas, that we will invest £100 million in the UK fishing industry, and I will be bringing forward proposals for this investment in due course.

Finally, although it is not a consequence of the trade and co-operation agreement, the end of the transition period and the fact that we have left both the customs union and the single market does mean that there is some additional administration accompanying exports to the EU. I am aware that there have been some teething issues as businesses get used to these new processes. Authorities in the EU countries are also adjusting to new procedures. We are working closely with both industry and authorities in the EU to iron out these issues and to ensure that goods flow smoothly to market.

Mr Carmichael [V]: For years, this Government have promised our fishing industry a sea of opportunity, but, today, our boats are tied up in harbour, their propellers fouled with red tape manufactured in Whitehall. Boats that are able to go to sea are landing their catches in Denmark—an expensive round trip of at least 72 hours, which takes work away from processors and other shoreside businesses in this country. Our Fisheries Minister describes promises made by Ministers as “dreams” and apparently did not think it was worth reading the agreement as soon as it was made, even though every second counted. How on earth was it allowed to come to this? The EU trade agreement allows a grace period on customs checks for EU businesses. Why was there no grace period allowed for our exporters, and will the Government engage with the EU as a matter of urgency to make good that most fundamental of errors?

Yesterday, the Prime Minister told the Liaison Committee that compensation is being considered for our fishing industry. Who will be compensated, for what, and by how much? When will our scheme be published and what steps will be taken to help processors, catchers and traders in the meantime? On the loss of quota swaps and other mechanisms, as the Fisheries Minister said yesterday, this could be done Government to Government in-year. Can the Secretary of State explain today how the literally hundreds of producer organisation to producer organisation swaps done every year will be done on a Government-to-Government basis?

Finally, what will happen at the end of a five-and-a-half year transition period? A transition normally takes us from point A to point B. This transition takes us from point A to point A with a new negotiation. Is zonal attachment still the Government's policy on quota shares?

This is a shambles of the Government's own making; there is no one else to blame now. When will the Minister start listening to the industry? I make him this offer: I can convene a virtual roundtable of all the affected sectors today or tomorrow. Will he meet with me and them to sort this out? The time for complacency has passed.

George Eustice: May I begin where the right hon. Gentleman ended and say that we are looking and working very closely with industry on this matter? We are having twice-a-week meetings with all the key stakeholders and all the key sectors to help them understand

[George Eustice]

these issues. Yesterday, we had a meeting with the Dutch officials; earlier this week, we had a meeting with the French; and, on Friday, we had a meeting with the Irish to try to iron out some of these teething problems. They are only teething problems. When people get used to using the paperwork, goods will flow normally. Of course, it would have been open to the EU to offer us a grace period, just as we have had a grace period for its goods coming to us. For reasons known only to the EU and the way that it approaches its particular regulations, that was not something that it was willing to do, so we have had to work with these arrangements from a standing start and, clearly, that causes certain issues.

The right hon. Gentleman asked what happens after five and a half years. As I said in my opening statement, after that period, we are free to change access arrangements and change sharing arrangements, and we will do so. He asked specifically about swaps. It is important to note that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has all of the information on all of the swaps that have taken place in recent years, since each of those producer organisation to producer organisation swaps requires the Government to agree them. It is, therefore, quite possible for us to build those swaps into the annual exchanges. Annual exchanges of fishing opportunities are a normal feature of annual negotiations, and we have also retained the ability to do in-year swaps on behalf of those POs.

The right hon. Gentleman has raised the issue of what the fisheries Minister said yesterday. I think the record will show that she did not say she did not have time to read the agreement; what she actually said was that her jaw did not drop when she was told what was in the agreement. There may be a reason for that, which is that she knew what was likely to be in the agreement for at least a week, since I had been discussing it with her and we were both in regular contact with our negotiators.

Finally, I am aware that the Prime Minister mentioned yesterday that the Government remain open to considering compensation for sectors that might have been affected through no fault of their own. We will look closely at this issue, but in the meantime, we are going to work very closely with the industry to ensure that we can iron out these difficulties.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con) [V]: The Secretary of State will be aware that fishermen in Cornwall have been very disappointed with the agreement reached on quota with the EU, and the fact that its vessels can still fish in our six to 12-mile limit. There is real concern that our inshore fleet, which makes up the vast majority of vessels in my constituency, will benefit little from this new deal, so what assurances can he give the fishermen of Mevagissey and Newquay, as well as fishermen across Cornwall, that the Government will be working with our inshore fleet to make sure it can benefit as much as possible from this new deal, and that those fishermen will be in a good position to increase their share of the quota when we come to the end of the adjustment period?

George Eustice: We left the London fisheries convention and gave notice under that because it is our intention that the six to 12-mile zone should be reserved predominantly for our own fishermen, and at the end of the five and a

half years, that is exactly what we will be seeking to achieve. There are some uplifts for fishermen in the Celtic sea, and in particular those in Cornwall—as I mentioned earlier, haddock has moved from 10% to 20%—and the Celtic sea is also an area that often had its fishing interests affected by the ability of Ireland to invoke Hague preference, which depleted our share of some stocks, notably cod. With the absence of Hague preference, there will be some other uplifts in those areas.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Fishing has every right to feel betrayed and let down by this Government. The industry was promised a better deal, but they have not got one. Fishers fear some of the extra quota is just paper fish—fish that might not even exist, or are hard for British boats to catch. The promise to immediately exclude European boats from our six to 12-mile limit was broken, and the catch app and export systems are cumbersome, bureaucratic, and home-grown Tory red tape that the industry can ill afford. Shellfish exporters feel particularly betrayed: they are unable to export until April, because the Government failed to negotiate a deal that included them.

Yesterday, the PM promised compensation for those affected by export chaos, but Downing Street seemed to U-turn on this less than six hours later. Fishers deserve better than this incompetent Government, so when will the distant water fleet be able to go to sea again? When will the new avalanche of paperwork be scaled back? When will the £100 million be available for coastal communities? When will British fishers get the extra quota they were promised? When will the requirement to land more British fish in British ports finally be introduced, and when will this Government actually start standing up for our fishers with action, not just soundbites?

George Eustice: I know that in previous debates on fishing the hon. Gentleman has spoken of the importance of tariff-free access to the EU market, and the trade and co-operation agreement gives our fishing export businesses that access, which is particularly important for the shellfish sector.

It is not the case that shellfish cannot be exported at all until April. There have been certain issues regarding bivalve molluscs and getting the correct paperwork, and some issues around depuration and the ability to export stocks that have not been purified prior to export, but they do not amount to a ban on the export of shellfish.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the distant water fleets. It is a convention that in the absence of agreements on quotas—this is pertinent to the agreement we have with Norway—access is suspended, but we will seek access to Arctic cod in the usual way for those parts of our fleet that benefit from that stock.

The hon. Gentleman asked when fishermen will see the uplift in quota. As I made clear, the EU is giving up 15% of its catch in our waters in year one, so fishermen will see some important advantages in this very first year.

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con) [V]: We are seeing teething issues arise for our fishing exporters, with health checks and customs documents causing some backlogs in exports to the EU. Will my right hon. Friend outline the steps his Department is taking to ensure that exporters know what is required of them, so that those challenges can be eased?

George Eustice: We have been working closely with authorities, particularly in France and the Netherlands, to understand the sorts of issues that they are finding. At one end of the spectrum, many of the issues are quite trivial, such as where the stamp is; we have even had questions about the colour of the ink used on the forms, pagination and the way pages are numbered. Those are all trivial problems that can be sorted out—indeed, some leeway is being given for such issues in France, given that there is sometimes a difference in interpretation. There are other, more significant issues, notably around import agents failing to pre-declare properly or at all. We are working closely with the industry on those, with regular meetings, to ensure that they are addressed.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP) [V]: “Stay in the UK,” they said in 2014; “Leave the EU,” they said in 2016; “A sea of opportunity,” they said in 2020—bad advice, backed by lies and disinformation, all down the line, and Scotland’s fishing industry is among those feeling the betrayal. Now, Scots businesses cannot get their product to their European markets, EU fishing fleets can still access our waters, and we are still subject to the CFP but now do not have a say in how it runs. Scots businesses have lost many thousands of pounds and communities are facing job losses. DFDS cannot take groupage loads until Monday at the earliest, because the Government made a mess of the paperwork system. Businesses may close and people may lose jobs because this Government messed up. Jimmy Buchan of the Scottish Seafood Association—once a Tory election candidate—said that Ministers are not doing enough. The sales director of John Ross told UK Ministers that the Brexit deal was worthless unless they took action. It is not just “teething issues”, Minister. It is chaos, and it is costing businesses shedloads of money. Who exactly do they apply to for compensation? Shall I give them the Minister’s mobile phone number?

George Eustice: As I said earlier, there have been some teething problems, particularly in Scotland, I know. DFDS established a hub system at Larkhall so it could group consignments together. It has had some difficulty getting the right information from some of the fishing businesses in Scotland. Food Standards Scotland is working hard to address the issue.

The hon. Lady says that the Government made a mess of the paperwork. She will be aware that the paperwork is the responsibility of the Scottish Government. I have spoken regularly to Fergus Ewing about this, and he maintains—I believe he is right—that there is no lack of export health certification capacity; the vets and the fish certifying officers are just trying to get used to complicated new paperwork. I will talk to DFDS later today to see whether there is anything we can do to help, but I pay tribute to the work that it and Food Standards Scotland are doing to work through some of the technical differences. The short answer to the current challenge is to work through each of the problems as they present themselves, so that they are not repeated and goods can flow smoothly.

Lia Nici (Great Grimsby) (Con) [V]: The fishing community in Grimsby welcomes the deal agreed by the Prime Minister, particularly the springboard it gives us to take back more quota as the years go on, and our

tariff-free arrangements. Can my right hon. Friend confirm when the details of the £100 million fund and the international quota swaps will be made available to us?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend’s constituency is home to the UK’s fish processing industry, and tariff-free access will be important for some of those sectors. She asked two specific questions. The first was on the new £100 million fund that the Prime Minister announced. We are working on the details of that and will in the next month or two consult on how the fund should be allocated and used. Secondly, she asked about the issue of swaps. Those negotiations with the European Union and the trilateral with Norway and the European Union are about to commence. We envisage that, probably in the next couple of weeks, there would be a final conclusion on how we manage the North sea, and that would include swapping arrangements.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP) [V]: Eight-five per cent. of the seafood caught by my local fishing fleet goes to customers in the EU. Along with boats right across the UK, they are currently tied up, as logistics firms will not accept any more produce due to the current customs chaos. Can the Secretary of State explain how he plans to resolve what he dismisses as “teething problems” and clarify what the Prime Minister meant when he talked about financial compensation for their losses?

George Eustice: We are working closely with the industry and DFDS to identify what we can do to address some of the problems that have been encountered. I am aware that late last week, DFDS suspended the groupage service that it was offering to smaller consignments and has focused on single larger consignments, particularly of Scottish salmon. I understand that it believes it has sorted out some of those problems and intends next week to resume some of those groupage consignments. There is a challenge here: in a group of several consignments, maybe three people would have got the paperwork right, but if one person has not, that can cause issues for everybody. We need people to pay attention to the detail and to get that paperwork right. We are working closely with the industry so that it can acclimatise itself to this administrative process.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con) [V]: My constituent Andrew Trust, the owner of Ocean Harvest, is finding that the high cost of border control charges, export health certificates, the need for a fiscal representative in France and the uncertainty that his fish will reach the buyer in the EU poses a real threat to his business. What compensating measures will the Government put in place?

George Eustice: The key thing is to get this process working more smoothly, and that requires traders to familiarise themselves with it. I have also spoken to fish operators in my constituency, which is in that part of the world. Those who have experience of exporting more widely around the world, including to the far east, are quite familiar with these processes and are coping with them, but for those businesses for which this is new, it will take time to get used to the paperwork.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab) [V]: Fishing communities across the country feel that their genuine concerns have been used for political purposes and they

[Cat Smith]

have ended up being sold down the river. Why does the Secretary of State think that fishers in Fleetwood and across the country feel angry and let down by the way they have been betrayed by his Government's choices, and how much of the £100 million promised to the industry will be spent on improving port facilities in Fleetwood?

George Eustice: Port facilities will, indeed, be one of the areas that the new £100 million fund will address around the country; we want to build capacity there as our share of the catch grows. The Government have maintained all along that we were aiming for something closer to zonal attachment. As I made clear earlier, we took an important step towards that objective, with the EU giving up 25% of its catch in our waters as part of the wider agreement. Yes, we would have liked to have gone further, and after the first five and a half years, we will.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con) [V]: Pulse trawling, which uses electrical signals to drive flatfish such as sole from the seabed into nets, is highly controversial and damaging to our marine environment. Many in Marlow and Beaconsfield have written to me about how we can protect our marine environment moving forward. Therefore, can my right hon. Friend confirm that, with the end of the transition period at the beginning of this month, we have seen the last of this practice in UK waters?

George Eustice: I can. We have the freedom to regulate through technical measures in our own waters, and we have banned pulse trawling.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP) [V]: With fish exporters paying over £500 or £600 a day in extra paperwork since the Tory Brexit deal came into force, in what world does the Secretary of State believe that this represents frictionless, barrier-free trade, as the Prime Minister claimed the deal delivers?

George Eustice: There are no tariff barriers. We secured an agreement through the trade and co-operation agreement that means tariff-free trade in all goods, including fish.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con) [V]: While some of the benefits of leaving the CFP are going to be postponed for five and a half years, can the Secretary of State set out what action he is taking right now, with the powers that we do have, to benefit both the marine environment and the under-10 metre fishing fleet?

George Eustice: My right hon. Friend raises an important point, which is that while we have reached a quota sharing and access agreement for five and a half years, we do have the freedom to set our own regulations. We have already banned pulse trawling, and we are consulting on and will soon be bringing forward measures to further protect the Dogger Bank. We will continue to look for opportunities to use technical measures to enhance conservation in our waters.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance) [V]: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for his work to date on the particular fishing issues relating to Northern Ireland, but would he recognise that there are some outstanding matters, including a permanent commitment that Northern Ireland boats can land products in local ports without sanitary and phytosanitary or other checks, addressing

the exclusion of Northern Ireland boats from all but two ports in the Republic of Ireland and ensuring that new quota allocations reflect the existing fixed quota allocation units?

George Eustice: Yes, there are some issues in Northern Ireland that we are working through. For the purposes of regulation, we have taken the position that Northern Ireland vessels should not require an SPS check or a catch certificate to land in their home port. Such an idea would clearly be ridiculous, so we are not requiring that, and we have agreed that with the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. There are some remaining issues about the Northern Ireland protocol and some of the easements we have had on trade and what will replace them, and we are working closely with the Commission and with colleagues in DAERA to agree on that.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Catching fish is one thing; landing and processing fish is quite another. If we are to be even more ambitious in five and a half years' time and catch even more fish, what are the Government going to do in the next five and a half years to develop our fish processing industry?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend makes a very important point, and that is why the Prime Minister has announced this new £100 million fund, which will support the infrastructure at ports to cope with a growing share of the catch. We will also look at supporting processing as well, so that we can add value to the fish we catch.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab) [V]: The National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations described the Prime Minister's EU trade deal as "minuscule, marginal, paltry, pathetic" and some British fishers are now landing their catch straight on to the continent to avoid the Government's red tape and the impending lorry queues chaos at the border, so does the Secretary of State agree that this is driving jobs away from the UK and hitting hard our coastal communities?

George Eustice: I do not agree with that. As I said earlier, we do recognise that fishermen would have liked a larger uplift, and we absolutely recognise that throughout the negotiation we were arguing for a move to a share that was closer to zonal attachment, but this does represent a significant step in the right direction, with a 25% loss of what the EU currently catches in our waters, and that will bring additional fishing opportunities to our own sector.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): The fishermen of Salcombe, Dartmouth and Brixham are now faced with catch certificates, health certificates, and export documentation, all of which is extensive red tape and comes with a cost. What is the Department doing to reform that system, and to improve it and reduce bureaucracy? We are hearing reports from the EU that customs officials are deliberately delaying British exports on the European mainland. What steps have been taken to hold them to account, and to ensure a streamlined process and to ensure that the EU upholds its side of the deal?

George Eustice: The bureaucracy that we are having to fill in is obviously designed by the European Union, and in some cases, on many export health certificates,

the form is a generic World Trade Organisation form that has not had a great deal of thought given to it. We think the paperwork could be improved, but we would need the EU to agree to engage with that. For now we have to work with the paperwork that it designates. It is EU bureaucracy, but we are working closely with European countries to get a better understanding of what is required.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP) [V]: DEFRA's consultation letter of October 2020 on future quota arrangements contained much emphasis on zonal attachment and how it might be applied at UK level. With a small maritime zone, that would severely disadvantage Northern Ireland as only 20% of our quota holdings are in the Irish sea, and the Irish sea is shared by the UK's four Administrations, plus the Isle of Man. Discrimination faced by Northern Ireland's fishermen at the hands of the EU and its Hague preference must not be replaced by a form of discrimination within the United Kingdom. We believe that any departure from the established principle of fixed quota allocation units will disadvantage Northern Ireland's fishermen. Will the Secretary of State confirm that he will not allow that to happen, and that Northern Ireland's fishing fleet will receive its share of the additional quota on the basis of its existing fixed quota allocation share?

George Eustice: We have made clear that the existing entitlements that people would have had under relative stability will continue to be issued under the legacy FQA units approach, but when we get additional fishing opportunities, we want to be able to allocate those in a different way. We are working closely with all UK Administrations on a fairer sharing arrangement, and we recognise the particular issues in the Irish sea. We are conscious of that, and we are working closely with the Northern Ireland Executive on getting a fair arrangement.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con) [V]: I have been contacted by many fishermen from Moray and across Scotland who are raising their serious concerns and frustrations about the current situation, both here with the Scottish Government element at Larkhall, and because of the losses they are currently experiencing. One local skipper, Liam Gray from Buckie, agreed that I could share his returns from this week. He is averaging £30 a box for the fish he is landing, and £47 a box for the prawns. That is half of what he needs to cover his costs. Will the Secretary of State outline the discussions that he is having with the Scottish Government about the problems at Larkhall, and about the compensation scheme that is clearly needed by fishermen right across the country?

George Eustice: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising those issues. As I have said, I am having a discussion with DFDS later today, to see whether we can offer help. It is working through a difficult situation, and working hard to address these problems, as is Food Standards Scotland. I have had numerous conversations on those matters with Fergus Ewing, and the Government have offered support should the Scottish Government want that to address these problems. January is always the slowest month in the fish trade, and the coronavirus pandemic has caused a lot of problems in the export market generally. The export market is quite weak, which is why the price of some fish has been lower.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP) [V]: We already know that if the period of disruption that we are witnessing is extended, European consumers will seek alternative suppliers and will be unlikely to return to Scottish suppliers. When asked how long it will take to sort the problems, the Secretary of State's ministerial colleague, the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid), said on the radio this morning, "How long is a piece of string?" Does the Secretary of State think that that is an acceptable answer for an industry that is facing what it describes as a "catastrophe"?

George Eustice: We are working very hard to make sure that that piece of string is as short as possible by having regular daily meetings with industry to try to iron out these problems.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con) [V]: Prior to our departure from the EU, 90% of Welsh shellfish exports were sent to the EU. Since the new customs system has been in place, The Lobster Pot, a family business on Ynys Môn, has had its imports arrive dead so that they cannot be used, and another, Menai Oysters, has decided to stop exporting until this problem is resolved. Can the Secretary of State please confirm to my Ynys Môn businesses what he is doing to speed up customs procedures and when they can expect to be able to securely export live shellfish?

George Eustice: I can assure my hon. Friend that we are working daily with industry to identify specific granular problems that are presenting themselves and then working with authorities in France to ensure that there is a common understanding of what is required so that we can speed up the passage of these goods.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD) [V]: The fishing industry is absolutely crucial to my constituency, and right now, as we have heard, it is in dead trouble. Everyone in the Palace of Westminster knows my stance on Brexit, but I am of a practical frame of mind, and I would like to offer my help to work with Ministers and with the industry to try to get this problem sorted, because that is what we must do. My right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) has made the offer of a roundtable discussion between the Government and industry. May I support that plea? Finally, financial compensation is going to be utterly crucial if the industry is to survive in remote parts of the UK like my constituency.

George Eustice: We are having roundtable discussions with the industry formally twice a week and are in conversation with it daily. We have helplines set up at the Animal and Plant Health Agency in Carlisle to tackle any of the technical issues that vets might have. We also have meetings with colleagues in this House to take on board any of the individual issues that they are receiving. I make this offer to any Member of this House who has a constituent bringing up a specific issue: do feed that back to us so that we can address the problems.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC) [V]: One catch brought to shore by Porthdinllaen fishing boats is scallops. Fair play to AM Seafoods of Fleetwood, which is still supporting Welsh fishermen by continuing

[Liz Saville Roberts]

to buy up scallops, but at present they have to be frozen as there is simply no way to get them to continental markets fresh. I am told that paperwork on both sides of the English channel now means an extra cost per consignment of 5%. This looks like a tariff and it hurts like a tariff to an industry that was promised a tariff-free Brexit. Could the Minister tell me how he is working with the Welsh Government to ensure the survival of Welsh inshore fishing, and will he admit that for our fishing communities this bare-bones deal is a no-deal Brexit by the back door?

George Eustice: It is certainly not a no-deal Brexit. There is a free trade and co-operation agreement that means that we have tariff-free trade in goods, including in shellfish. One of the key asks of the shellfish sector was that we sought to get a free trade agreement without tariffs. I regularly meet Lesley Griffiths, who attends the sub-committee we have that looks at some of the teething issues at the border, and we are in regular contact with her about the particular challenges in Wales.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con) [V]: Clearly the fishing fleet in the United Kingdom has been suppressed for the past 48 years, and as we come out and set our own policies, it will take time to develop the fishing fleets and, indeed, the fish processing centres. Will my right hon. Friend set out what the Government plan to do to ensure that our fishing fleet and fish processing centres are built up so that we can take full advantage of the fish in our waters?

George Eustice: There will be new opportunities with the uplift in quota that we are getting, but also the new requirements that we are bringing in to require vessels to land a greater proportion of their catch into the UK. The new £100 million fund announced by the Prime Minister will indeed go towards supporting that increased capacity at ports and in processing.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab) [V]: The shortage of vets to inspect fish, the lack of customs agents to process border forms and there not being enough time for businesses to adapt to new rules of origin are, I would suggest, a lot more than “teething problems”. The Secretary of State might want to rethink his analysis there, but what the fishing communities up and down our country want to know is when he will fix the problems caused by the Government’s failure to prepare for the new border arrangements.

George Eustice: We are working with the industry daily to identify the specific challenges that they are encountering, such as individual examples of why the French may have raised a query on an export health certificate. We are trying to deal with that and iron out that problem.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): UK fishermen are understandably frustrated by the current situation at the borders. Can my right hon. Friend therefore update the House on what discussions he has had with our European neighbours, since the end of the transition period, to tackle the issue?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend raises an important point, because many of the problems we have are often down to different interpretations of the official control regime in different countries, with Ireland, the Netherlands and France in some cases having different views on what is required. We are working very closely with them. We met Irish counterparts on Friday. We met French officials on Tuesday and have further meetings planned with them, and we met Dutch officials yesterday.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP) [V]: In the lead-up to the trade and co-operation agreement, John Ross Jr in Aberdeen said that it

“had to endure the government issuing a barrage of useless information”.

D. R. Collin in Eyemouth has said that Brexit has more or less finished the business. Prices at the quayside at Peterhead fish market are now 80% below normal. All of that can be taken together with what was described on the front page of the *Fishing News* as the Prime Minister’s “Brexit betrayal”. Is it not the case that rather than the promised sea of opportunity, through their incompetence the UK Government are now in danger of delivering instead a sea of insolvency for the Scottish seafood industry?

George Eustice: The responsibility for issuing the export health certificates that are causing these challenges rests with the Scottish Government, but I would like to pay tribute to Food Standards Scotland, which is working very hard to resolve some of the issues being encountered.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): The Minister will be aware of the plight of D. R. Collin, the seafood suppliers in Eyemouth in my constituency. I know that his officials and those at the Scotland Office are working exceptionally hard to find a solution to the problems that it is facing as it tries to export to the EU. I back-up the calls for compensation for those facing losses as a consequence of this, but can he reassure me that those in his Department are doing everything they possibly can to find solutions to the problems that D. R. Collin and others are facing in trying to export and continue to sell their fish to Europe?

George Eustice: I can absolutely give my hon. Friend that assurance. I will be talking to DFDS later today. I pay tribute to what it is trying to do to resolve these problems. Some of the paperwork is complex. Its plan for a consolidation hub at Larkhall is a good one. When we iron out these problems, the system will work.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): First, I take the opportunity to ask the Secretary of State to thank the Fisheries Minister for taking a call from us on Christmas eve and again having her office contact us early on Christmas day and Boxing day to clarify the situation. I reject the character assassination that she has been subject to in the past 24 hours, and I think that should be put on record.

I welcome the demise of the Hague preference. That scheme discriminated badly against fishermen in Northern Ireland, but I appeal to the Minister to please not replace that discriminatory process of theft of our fish with a UK replacement that discriminates how quota is shared out within the four nations of the United Kingdom.

Northern Ireland fishermen will not tolerate using share-out to placate English fishermen who feel they have been let down. I am appealing to the Secretary of State to ensure that we get a fair share-out of that quota.

From Howth to Greencastle, Northern Ireland fishermen now face a deliberate hard border put in place by the Republic of Ireland. We are told that we cannot land in those traditional ports, yet boats from Skibbereen, in the very deep south of the Republic of Ireland, can catch mackerel in British waters and land them in Lisahally in Londonderry. When will the message go from the Government to the EU that we want a fair share-out in the process? If that cannot happen, I appeal to the Government to invoke article 16.

George Eustice: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his kind words about the Fisheries Minister. He is absolutely right: she was across the detail of this agreement and was briefing colleagues in the House over the Christmas period.

The hon. Gentleman raises sharing arrangements within the UK. We are consulting closely with each and every part of the UK about how additional opportunities could be shared differently. He is also right that the Hague preference was against the interests of the Northern Ireland fishing fleet. That was a concept that the UK created in the late 1970s to try to get a fairer share, but, as is often the case with the EU, it is a system that ended up being used against our interests.

Mr Speaker: Let us head up to Birmingham with Mike Wood.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con) [V]: Dudley South, Mr Speaker.

Media reports at the weekend suggested that the EU trade deal prevents the UK from protecting our marine conservation. Can the Secretary of State confirm whether we have the legal powers to regulate the vessels and the forms of fishing that are conducted in British waters if we feel it is necessary to protect our marine wildlife and particularly our marine conservation areas?

George Eustice: Yes, I can absolutely make that point. The technical conservation measures are for us, and us alone, to make. There will be times when we may seek bilateral agreement with the European Union on that, but there will be nothing to stop us putting conditions on vessels, provided they are not discriminatory and do not aim to discriminate against the European Union.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD) [V]: While I welcome the Minister's statement that he will be meeting stakeholders, I assure him that those stakeholders understand the issues; it appears to be the Government who have failed to grasp them, particularly with adjusted quota shares, especially in whitefish, which no amount of understanding or explaining forms will fix. When will there be an effective mechanism for allowing co-operation between UK and EU fishermen on adjusting fishing opportunities to fix the mess that this Government have created?

George Eustice: A common feature of annual fisheries negotiations, which will continue, is what are called the annual exchanges, where a swapping arrangement takes place Government to Government. We are very aware of the swaps that took place from producer organisation

to producer organisation in the past. We have all that data. We are working with the industry to ensure that we get it access to the quotas that it actually fishes.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con) [V]: Other Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Lia Nici), have raised the issue of the £100 million fund. When we are talking about infrastructure projects, £100 million is very limited. Can my right hon. Friend give an assurance that he will press the Treasury hard for further funding, and that there can be some cross-working with the other funds that are available for coastal communities and regional funding?

George Eustice: Obviously we all know that, on every front, people would always like more money, but we also recognise that the Treasury has to balance the finances as best it can in these difficult situations. It is £100 million of new money, and it is in addition to the money that we have already made available to every part of the UK to replace the legacy European maritime and fisheries fund.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP) [V]: Thanks to the United Kingdom Government's incompetence, the fishing industry is in chaos, not just in Scotland but across the United Kingdom, and many face bankruptcy. In a disastrous interview with Radio Scotland this morning, the Secretary of State's junior colleague, the Under-Secretary of State for Scotland, the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid), told us that everyone knew there would be challenges with Brexit, so when will the Secretary of State be renaming the "sea of opportunity" the "sea of challenges"?

George Eustice: The Under-Secretary of State for Scotland, my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) is absolutely right on this issue. We have been clear for the whole year, as we prepared for the end of the transition period, that new paperwork would be needed. It is inevitable that when we introduce the requirement for export health certificates, for instance—these are new processes for customs officials and so on in France to get used to—there will be some teething problems. That is what we are seeing and we need to work hard to iron them out.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con) [V]: As my right hon. Friend and fellow Cornish MP will know, crab and lobster exports are a big part of our fishing sector in North Cornwall. There have been reports in the press of delays specifically around export health certificates. Will the Secretary of State outline how widespread this issue is in the south-west and what we can do to expedite the customs processes to ensure that shipments are delivered faster?

George Eustice: The principal issue is that DFDS, which, as well as leading on logistics in Scotland has a significant presence in the west country, encountered some difficulties with the accuracy of the paperwork, in particular the export health certificates, and some particular issues with import agents failing to declare the correct information on the EU's TRACES system. For that reason, it temporarily suspended mixed consignments—the groupage—until it had been able to iron out those problems. I understand that it may be considering starting that service again next week.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind) [V]: Recently, Jimmy Buchan, the chief executive of the Scottish Seafood Association, mooted the idea of an independent clearing house for Europe in Scotland, which would allow Scottish fish producers to receive written clearance for export before their goods had to leave Scotland. What consultations has the UK Government had with the Scottish Seafood Association on the viability of that idea?

George Eustice: We are working very closely with the industry on all these matters. In the short term, we have to sort out issues arising with import agents and declarations on TRACES and so forth. However, if in the medium term we can come to further arrangements with the European Union, we can look at that. With the hub at Larkhall, DFDS is trying to consolidate loads and do export health certificates in one place.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): We have taken back control of our fishing waters. Now, I and many in Redcar and Cleveland want to stop supertrawlers damaging our wildlife, harming and sadly killing porpoises and fish off the Teesside coast. Will the Secretary of State outline the steps being taken to protect our seas from the practices of supertrawlers?

George Eustice: This is an issue that is often raised and refers, I think, specifically to a Lithuanian vessel that started to access our waters last year, targeting mainly horse mackerel. There are things we can do and are doing through technical measures. We have already banned pulse trawlers, which were predominantly a Dutch part of the fleet. We are also looking at new spatial measures to protect Dogger Bank.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP) [V]: Mr Speaker: “as a seafood exporter, it feels as though our own government has thrown us into the cold Atlantic waters without a lifejacket”.

Those are not my words, but those of John Ross Jr., an historic smoked salmon producer based in my Aberdeen South constituency. Will the Secretary of State stop patronising businesses by referring to this Brexit chaos as “teething issues”? Will he apologise to John Ross Jr. and can he confirm when he will deliver full financial compensation for all the damage his Government are currently causing?

George Eustice: The salmon industry in Scotland benefits from tariff-free access to the EU market. While there have been, as I said, some problems, particularly around groupage and mixed consignments, the salmon trade has continued. We estimate that there are about 20 to 30 lorries a day crossing the short straits predominantly carrying Scottish salmon.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con) [V]: I thank my right hon. Friend for all the work he is doing to resolve the issues around paperwork for our fishermen. My

Ilfracombe fishermen have now brought the fleet in as they cannot transport their fish. Given that these issues are causing losses on both sides of the channel, is there an option for free customs clearance on perishable goods?

George Eustice: The solution is for us to work closely with authorities in France to get an agreement on what is required. To be fair to the French authorities, while they have, as I said, encountered some quite trivial paperwork errors, they have generally shown some forbearance and allowed those goods to travel through. There were problems with IT systems in Calais and Boulogne early in the new year that exacerbated the situation. Those have been fixed now. We continue to work with the French authorities to try to make sure that the process can be made as smooth as possible, so that goods continue to travel on time.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Right now, a few miles from here, there are 10 EU trawlers: eight Irish, one French and a Dutch factory trawler. All but the Dutchmen are steaming south towards the beautiful village of Killybegs—Na Cealla Beaga in Irish—in County Donegal. In five years’ time, EU nations such as Ireland will lose about 25% of their access to mainly Scottish waters; perhaps two or more of those boats will not be there, but perhaps they will. Regardless, the EU promised Ireland €1.051 billion-worth of help. Will the Minister tell me why politicians such as Neale Richmond say Ireland feels “constant solidarity” from the European Union, while Scotland, which has already been hit by the losses from its biggest market—probably more than 25% right now—is getting little or no solidarity at all from the United Kingdom, certainly not €1.051 billion-worth, which has left fishermen threatening to dump their catch on the gates of Westminster next week?

George Eustice: Although we did not get the larger uplift that we wanted, and we did not get as close to zonal attachment as we wanted, we got a significant step in the right direction, with an increase of around 25% in our fishing opportunities, including in the pelagic sector, particularly around the west of Scotland, and in some of the mackerel quota, where there has been some additional uplift. We are aware that there are consequences for the EU fleets. They have had to give up some of that quota, and obviously their own Governments and the EU are considering compensation for their losses.

Mr Speaker: I am suspending the House briefly to enable the necessary arrangements to be made for the next item of business.

11.31 am

Sitting suspended.

Speaker's Statement

11.36 am

Mr Speaker: Before I call the shadow Leader of the House to ask the business question, let me say that today will be the last occasion on which Steve Jaggs is in the Chamber as an Associate Serjeant. Steve is retiring after over 30 years in the service of this place, during which he has played a valuable role in the upkeep of the buildings in which we work, as well as having important responsibilities relating to arrangements for State Opening and as Keeper of the Great Clock—what a great title to retire with. I thank Steve for his loyal service to this House. He has been a great man and has certainly ensured the safe wellbeing of this building and its maintenance. Steve, enjoy retirement with your family; you will be missed. Do not forget to keep in touch with us.

Business of the House

11.37 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): The business for the week commencing 18 January will include:

MONDAY 18 JANUARY—Opposition day (14th allotted day). There will be a debate on a motion relating to universal credit and working tax credit, followed by a debate on access to remote education and the quality of free school meals. Both debates will arise on a motion in the name of the official Opposition.

TUESDAY 19 JANUARY—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Trade Bill, followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the High Speed Rail (West Midlands - Crewe) Bill.

WEDNESDAY 20 JANUARY—Remaining stages of the National Security and Investment Bill, followed by a motion relating to the appointment of an electoral commissioner.

THURSDAY 21 JANUARY—Debate on a motion relating to errors in payments made to victims of the Equitable Life scandal, followed by general debate on the operation of the child maintenance service during the covid-19 outbreak. The subjects for those debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 22 JANUARY—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 25 January will include:

MONDAY 25 JANUARY—Opposition day (15th allotted day). There will be a debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition. Subject to be announced.

TUESDAY 26 JANUARY—Remaining stages of the Environment Bill (day 1).

WEDNESDAY 27 JANUARY—Consideration of Lords amendments.

THURSDAY 28 JANUARY—General debate on Holocaust Memorial Day 2021. The subject for that debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee. It will be followed by a further debate to be determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 29 JANUARY—The House will not be sitting.

Valerie Vaz: May I start by reiterating your comments, Mr Speaker, about Steve Jaggs? On behalf of the Opposition, I thank him for all the work that he has done. He has spent 30 years here, and, I understand, spent five years at Buckingham Palace—a great, long time of public service. We thank him and wish him a very happy retirement. I just hope that he did not get a clock as his leaving present!

I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business. It is right that there should be clarity for the next few weeks, until the end of January. The motion on private Members' Bills was passed last night, so I am keen to ask him whether he will ensure that the list of private Members' Bills will stay in place when they return. There was some concern that Members would fall off the list, so could the Leader of the House tell us when the end of the Session will be?

[Valerie Vaz]

The Opposition thank you, Mr Speaker, the Clerk of the House and John Angeli for finding a solution for Westminster Hall in another venue, so that we can continue to hold the Government to account. The Leader of the House will know that ministerial responses have been of great concern to our colleagues, and the deputy shadow Leader of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), has conducted a survey of hon. Members. I will write to you, Mr Speaker, with further information, but to give you a flavour, one of our colleagues wrote in April about childcare providers and has not yet received a response. Some of them say that Departments leave the responses so long that it is not necessary to make a response.

The Government should have anticipated this issue. These questions are one of the tools that we have to hold the Government to account. I have to say that the Cabinet Office and the Leader of the House are very assiduous. I think they are the best performers—the quickest responders. The worst are the Treasury and the Department of Health and Social Care. That is all the more reason why the Government should have provided extra support, given that we have the worst economic record of all the major economies and the worst death record.

This is a shambolic Government because, right to the wire, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government has made a U-turn on evictions for renters. He said that no one will be evicted because of coronavirus, but the new statutory instrument is watered down. It is an affirmative instrument, so could we have a debate on the Floor of the House, so that we can debate the new watered-down provisions?

Another broken promise: the Secretary of State said that the Government would reimburse all councils for all the money they spent on measures in the pandemic, but they have not, so could we have a statement? The burden should not fall on our constituents from an increase in council tax or a cut in services.

Either the Government are not speaking to each other or the Health Secretary is not reporting to Cabinet. He told the World Health Organisation on 14 December that there was a new variant, so it is a bit weird that the Secretary State for Education did not know that there was a variant. It is probably a worse excuse than “the dog ate my homework”. Given that we have Education questions on Monday, could the Education Secretary make a statement on whether he knew about the new variant? Also, one of my constituents, who is a supply teacher, has said that, according to her agency, she does not qualify for furlough because schools are open. Could the Secretary of State address both those points in his statement?

It seems that the Prime Minister does not take his own advice to exercise locally. I do not whether it was the letters from his Back Benchers who said what a terrible Prime Minister he was; they must have said, “On yer bike,” and he took it literally. Many of my constituents want clarity. They are asking why angling is allowed and not golf. One of them asked me whether they can drive to the arboretum in Walsall to exercise, so could we have a statement to clarify those coronavirus issues?

My hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) tabled a written question, and was told that the last time the Foreign Secretary raised Nazanin’s case was on 13 December. That is a month ago. Every minute spent away from family is a wasted minute in the middle of this coronavirus. The Foreign Affairs Committee report on the UK’s relationship with Iran published on 16 December said that the current approach to seeking the release of detainees is not working. Could we have a debate in Government time—not a report for 20 minutes, where a Minister does not respond, but a full debate? Anousheh needs diplomatic protection. Luke Symons needs to be protected. There was an attack on Aden airport, a place I know very well from my childhood. We need a full statement.

It is Martin Luther King Day on Monday. What a difference in the rhetoric and the march for jobs and freedom in 1963 compared with last week. Quite rightly, the outgoing president will be impeached. We are on the side of the incoming Biden-Harris Administration, who want to form allies of democracy.

Finally, just for you, Mr Speaker: Chorley 2, Derby County nil.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Mr Speaker, I think that was a reference to association football, so I congratulate you as well.

Before I respond to the right hon. Lady, I pay tribute to Godfrey Cameron, whose death was referred to in the Chamber yesterday, but not by name. Mr Speaker, you referred to him earlier today. He has been one of our security personnel. He worked incredibly hard for the House. He died suddenly at the age of 55. He was an heroic figure; he managed to stop a young lady jumping off Westminster bridge. He is a model of the type of service we have been so fortunate to have in this House. His death will be much mourned by his family, his wife, Hyacinth, and his children, and we pray for the repose of his soul. Eternal rest grant unto him, O Lord, and may light perpetual shine upon him. May he rest in peace.

May I now move to happier news? I have not had a chance to congratulate all those who were rewarded in the new year’s honours. It is a fine list: the Counsel for Domestic Legislation, Daniel Greenberg, has been made a Companion of the Order of the Bath—that is well deserved, and for one of the cleverest people I have ever had the opportunity to engage with; Marianne Cwynarski has been made a Commander of the most excellent Order of the British Empire, which is most thoroughly deserved, for all the work she has done in keeping this place covid-secure and operating; John Angeli has been made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire for services to Parliament, particularly for broadcasting; John Owen, Director of Strategic Business Resilience at the House of Commons and House of Lords, has been made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire for services to Parliament; David Smith, Deputy Managing Director of the Parliamentary Digital Service, has been made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire for services to Parliament; Matthew Stutely, Director of Software Engineering, Parliamentary Digital Service, has been made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire for services to Parliament; Avi Dussaram, Member Services Officer, Parliamentary Digital Service, has been made a Member of the Order of the British Empire for services to Parliament; Rupert Hay-Campbell, Head of Architecture, Parliamentary Digital Service, has been made a Member of the Order of the British Empire for

services to Parliament and to the community in Essex; Barry Underwood, Head of Distribution Services, Vote Office, House of Commons, has been made a Member of the Order of the British Empire for services to Parliament, particularly during the covid-19 response, and for voluntary services to football—you will like that bit, Mr Speaker: as I understand it, that is one of your great interests. I really take pride in congratulating all of them, as this is symbolic of the wonderful service that this House receives from so many dedicated members of staff.

How fortunate we are to have Mr Jaggs in the Chamber so that I can add my tribute to him. I think the title “Keeper of the Great Clock” is most wonderful; it is hard to think of one that could be better—many people would swap the title of “Prime Minister” to be known as Keeper of the Great Clock. The enormous amount of work that is done is something for which we are very grateful. Thirty years’ service in this place is terrific—I did not know about the five years in Buckingham Palace, but I note Mr Jaggs’ affection for royal palaces, as well as his willingness to turn his hand to everything.

It is a comment on the enthusiasm and support we have in this House that before I came to the Dispatch Box today, Mr Jaggs, our very distinguished Keeper of the Great Clock, was cleaning the Dispatch Box—he was doing everything. When we had a leak in the ceiling, it was Mr Jaggs who dealt with it. I do not really know how this place is going to run after your retirement, so if you get an urgent call to come back, you will know that we need you as a matter of priority. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”]

I am sorry for that long preamble, Mr Speaker, but I think it was important. Let me move on to the right hon. Lady’s questions. The end of the Session will be announced in the normal way. She will ask about this every week and I will give the same answer every week: it will be announced in the normal way.

The news on the developments for Westminster Hall is encouraging. As I said yesterday, it is important that we maintain scrutiny. I take extremely seriously the right hon. Lady’s questions on ministerial responses. It is my aim to help any Member of the House who is not getting responses to try to speed the process up. I am grateful for her praise of my own office, although I must confess that the volume of correspondence that I receive is on an entirely different and lower scale from that received by the Treasury and the Department of Health and Social Care, so it is perhaps a little easier for me. One should have had sympathy for them at the beginning of the pandemic, but I think answers should now be coming through much more swiftly.

As regards the statutory instrument on repossessions, there always has to be a balance between renters and landlords; it needs to be a fair system to ensure not only that people’s rights of property are protected, but that people, during the pandemic, have their housing protected. It is all about getting that balance right.

The right hon. Lady raised the issue of council funding, which has been enormous, with £3 billion of additional support to councils announced in the spending review, more than £10 billion in additional covid funding, more than £22 billion for their local businesses and £4.6 billion of additional un-ringfenced funding. Councils have received

the money that they need, and this has been an important part of what the Government have been doing with taxpayers’ money.

The right hon. Lady mentioned that the Education Secretary is here answering questions on Monday, which is the opportunity to raise those questions, rather than using me as the postbox between Thursday and Monday. I am sure he will answer all those questions if they are of interest to other Members.

The Prime Minister was clearly exercising reasonably within all the rules—both the spirit and the letter of the rules. This game of trying to pick holes in what people are doing when they are obeying rules is undignified, and I think there is clarity in the rules; I think people know what they are supposed to do. People are allowed to exercise, and at the moment they are allowed to meet one person while exercising. These rules are absolutely clear, and the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis said that she did not believe people do not know the rules by now. They do, and the rules are being followed.

I obviously share the right hon. Lady’s concern about Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe; that is a truly important issue. I raise it every week after business questions, and I will continue to do so. I hear her request for a debate. I am not sure I will be able to grant that, but I certainly think that keeping the pressure up via the House of Commons is the right thing to do.

Finally, on the US Administration, we are right to be allies of democracy. It is really important that we get on with the incoming American President. I must confess that the actions of the outgoing President were a matter of the gravest concern. I do not think it is the business of Government Ministers to criticise the leaders of friendly countries, but what happened in Capitol Hill is a reminder of how delicate and fragile democracy is and the responsibility of politicians to protect democracy and not to be what one might call an accessory before the fact to disorder. That is a real problem, and let us hope for better things in the United States and that our special relationship will be able to flourish.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con) [V]: I do not know whether the Leader of the House is a fan of “The West Wing”, the fictitious political drama about an American President, but in that drama C. J. is the press secretary to the President, and every day she strides to the podium, announces the President’s policy and answers questions.

Apparently there is now a television studio built in Downing Street, and we are going to have our own C. J.: Allegra Stratton. However, we have a very different system of government. Ministers are supposed to come to the Dispatch Box to announce new policy first in the House of Commons and answer questions from MPs, not announce new policy to the media and take questions from journalists. Could we have a debate on this new situation in Government time at the earliest possible moment?

Mr Rees-Mogg: As it happens, I very much enjoyed “The West Wing”. I found it compelling TV watching and even bought the DVD set, which may sound surprisingly modern. Allegra Stratton’s role is one that has been carried on in the shadows for an extremely long time with the lobby briefings. Of course the Government have to brief journalists from both the newspapers and electronic media, to ensure that

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

Government policy is advertised to the world at large. There are two lobby briefings every day; one of them will now be filmed and in public. This is open government, which I thought my hon. Friend might like, but it will not in any way change the requirement of the ministerial code that policy announcements are made to this House first.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP) [V]: First, may I associate my party with the comments made regarding Godfrey Cameron and send our condolences to his family? I also take this opportunity to note the sad passing of the Archbishop of Glasgow, Philip Tartaglia, who died suddenly yesterday. I know that the House will join me in sending condolences to his family and to the Catholic community of Glasgow.

I will start with two agenda points. First, I note that the Labour Opposition have been allocated two debate days in the current business statement. When might my party expect one? Secondly, the debate on the House of Lords Trade Bill amendments is scheduled for next Tuesday, yet the amendments themselves will not be published until after the Lords finish their debate late on Monday night. Can I ask why there has been this undue haste in the scheduling?

Turning now to the Brexit fishing disaster, boats are confined to harbour, lorryloads of seafood have been destroyed, and the industry is losing £1 million a day as firms go bust. This is all the result of Brexit red tape imposed by this Government, yet when asked about this yesterday the Prime Minister refused to answer. When asked this morning how long this would last, the Government Minister contemptuously replied, “How long is a piece of string?” When can we have a debate about compensation for the Scottish seafood industry for the havoc that has been wreaked upon it by this Conservative Government? The Select Committee that oversees our relationship with the European Union is being scrapped. What parliamentary mechanism will replace it?

Finally, let me turn to the question that the Prime Minister refuses to answer. Can we have a debate on what democratic mechanism is available to the people of Scotland if they wish to change the way in which they are governed? I ask because today’s *The Scotsman* newspaper has published a poll stating that 57% of people in Scotland wish to become an independent country—the 18th poll in a row to report a pro-independence majority. It is no use the Leader of the House repeating the “once in a generation” mantra, as if expressing a view seven years ago means that people are forbidden from doing so again. What happens if a majority in Scotland take a different view and vote to have the right to choose an independent future? We need to have a debate on what this Parliament’s response to that outcome will be, and whether it still believes in the claim of right for Scotland, which states that people have a right to choose how they are governed.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Once again, the hon. Gentleman repeats his question, and I will therefore repeat the answer: it is very clear that the people of Scotland made their views clear in a vote in 2014, which was said to be a generational vote. That was the democratic mechanism

that they had, the democratic mechanism that was used, and the democratic mechanism that was accepted by the Scottish National party at the time.

What is going on in the SNP is interesting, is it not? I thought the hon. Gentleman might want to tell us a bit about that—about the rows between Mrs Sturgeon and Mr Salmond, with one accusing the other of not being entirely accurate in her evidence to the Scottish Parliament’s Committees. I thought he might be asking for a debate on that. Would it not be interesting to understand all the shenanigans that are going on—the accusations of forgetfulness, of money being spent, and of breaches of the ministerial code? Not a word of that: just the old complaint that the referendum in 2014 was not a valid referendum. It was: it was authoritative, and it was a once-in-a-generation vote. That is absolutely right, and we see the benefits of the Union. The figure I have previously given for UK taxpayers’ support for Scotland has gone up: it is now £8.6 billion. The strength of the United Kingdom is helping Scotland face this pandemic, and that is why the United Kingdom is so strong and is to the advantage of all its people.

As regards bringing forward amendments to the Trade Bill, it is an important piece of legislation, and we want to get it through as swiftly as possible. People are well aware of what has been going on in the House of Lords, and will be quite capable of discussing those issues. I am always happy to have discussions about an Opposition day for the SNP with the hon. Gentleman, as well as with the SNP Chief Whip, and I am sure those discussions will take place. I am aware of the Standing Orders commitments.

The fishing issue was covered a moment ago by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman should have tuned into that debate, rather than bringing it up at business questions, but the Government are tackling this issue and dealing with it as quickly as possible. The key is that we have our fish back: they are now British fish, and they are better and happier fish for it.

Mr Speaker: Obviously, there is no overwhelming evidence for that, but let us head to Mansfield with Ben Bradley.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con) [V]: The Government have put levelling up at the heart of their agenda for this Parliament, but the fundamentals that underpin many of our structures are sometimes contrary to that aim, not least the Equality Act 2010, which embeds identity politics and physical characteristics into everything that we do but ignores the socioeconomic and geographical inequalities that really drive disadvantage. Can my right hon. Friend find the time for us to debate that in the House, and to debate how we might reform things to seek equality of opportunity and fairness rather than to artificially equalise outcomes?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend makes an important and good point. He is a dogged campaigner on this issue, and I commend him for raising ways in which we can improve our approach to equality and disparity. I refer him to the words of the Minister for Women and Equalities, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), who said in December:

“We will not limit our fight for fairness to the nine protected characteristics laid out in the 2010 Equality Act”,

which have arguably led to a narrowing of our discussion about inequality, neglecting factors such as socioeconomic status and geography. I hope my hon. Friend will join me in welcoming the Minister's announcement that an equality hub is being established. It will truly broaden our understanding of equality in the UK today and it will work closely with the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, so excellently led by the Minister for Equalities, my hon. Friend the Member for Saffron Walden (Kemi Badenoch).

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

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab) [V]: I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement and say that I very much welcome the return to a two-week statement, which really does assist with planning. I also thank him for announcing the Backbench debates on Thursday 21 January, when we have a long-awaited debate on errors in payments made to victims of the Equitable Life scandal and a debate on the operation of the child maintenance service during the pandemic, and also on Thursday 28 January, when we have a very timely debate on Holocaust Memorial Day, the date of which is the 27th, as Members will know. The Committee has asked me to request protected time for that debate because, as we know, urgent questions and statements by Ministers eat into the time available for Backbench Business debates.

With the closure of Westminster Hall for the time being, may I echo the sentiments of the Chairs of the Procedure and Petitions Committees regarding the need to ensure that there is appropriate time for Backbench and Petitions Committee debates, which should be protected during the duration of the Westminster Hall closure? As always, the Backbench Business Committee would be very happy to facilitate the filling of any time that might become available on days other than Thursdays.

Lastly, youth unemployment rose in my constituency by 58% between March and November—the last date for which we currently have figures. Notwithstanding the pandemic, this highlights the precarious nature of employment for all too many young people under 25 years old. Can we have a debate in Government time on rebalancing the economy, levelling up and the need urgently to address the scourge of youth unemployment in places such as Gateshead in the north-east of England?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comments and very pleased to see that the Backbench Business Committee has decided to have a debate on 28 January for Holocaust Memorial Day. That is a wholly appropriate debate to be having and a very important one. I note his appeal to fill any time that may become available if business falls early. That has the risk of being unpredictable, but I know what he is asking for.

I am sorry to hear about the youth unemployment figures in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, which are a matter for concern. It is worth pointing out quite how much has been done to support employment during the pandemic, including the £280 billion of taxpayers' money that has been given in support. He is right to argue for levelling up. I am delighted that he is becoming so supportive of the Government's policy objectives. They will be the major themes of what the Government are doing in the rest of this Parliament.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con) [V]: Potholes drive us potty in the Potteries, so, in advance of National Pothole Day tomorrow, I hope my right hon. Friend will join me in applauding the engineers at JCB who, earlier this week, after extensive trials in Stoke-on-Trent, launched an all-new British innovation called the JCB Pothole Pro, which can repair potholes four times faster and at half the cost of conventional methods. Will my right hon. Friend enable us to have parliamentary time to celebrate this British ingenuity and encourage local councils to back British innovation as we strive to rid the country of the blight of potholes?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this, though I am not convinced that National Pothole Day is the most celebrated day across the country at large. None the less, what JCB has done is terrific. I read about it in the newspapers—the machine can fill potholes faster, as my hon. Friend says. It is a wonderful British innovation to deal with, it has to be said, a widespread British problem. This will shock right hon. and hon. Members, but there are even a few potholes in Somerset, that county of glory and bliss. I therefore hope to see the JCB machine working across the various Somerset councils.

The Government are providing local highway authorities in England outside London with £1.125 billion, including £500 million for the pothole fund for highway maintenance. As JCB can do it for half the price, should we say that this £500 million is worth £1 billion, or could we save £250 million of taxpayers' money? I will leave that for the House to deliberate upon.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab) [V]: Last week, I finally received the answer to a written parliamentary question that I tabled on 22 September asking for an update on the serious violence taskforce. The response stated that the taskforce is being discontinued, but I can find no statement from Home Office Ministers to that effect. Does the Leader of the House agree that the delay is unacceptable, and will he please ensure that the Home Secretary provides the House with a full update?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I apologise to the hon. Lady for the delay in the reply to her written parliamentary question. That has taken too long, and I reiterate, if hon. Members find that there are unacceptable delays, please will they notify me and my office and I will do whatever I can to facilitate faster responses? As regards the taskforce, my hon. Friend the Minister for Crime and Policing set out that there will be another taskforce, which will report directly to the Prime Minister, so I think that the position has now been made clear.

Miss Sarah Dines (Derbyshire Dales) (Con) [V]: For over 100 years, in one form or another, the Ashbourne bypass in Derbyshire Dales has been endlessly discussed, debated, consulted on and promised. The residents of Ashbourne, which is a quintessentially English medieval town, suffer from more 7,000 vehicles a day, including many heavy lorries from nearby quarries, rumbling through the town. With the expected post-Brexit boom and the promise of levelling up, rural communities such as mine should not be forgotten. May we please have a debate on the processes around how we build key infrastructure projects, not least the Ashbourne bypass?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I commend my hon. Friend's advocacy for the people of the Dales and her efforts in the campaign for the Ashbourne bypass. I understand from the *Derby Telegraph* that there has been progress towards making the bypass a reality, with the local authority considering the results of a consultation. That ties in with the Government's announcement of a £27 billion package to spend on our strategic road network. It will provide essential upgrades and new roads across the country.

I remind my hon. Friend that the Parliament Act 1911 refers to itself as a temporary measure, and it is 110 years old this year. A hundred years seems like a long time, but in a parliamentary context, perhaps not always.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I add my voice on behalf of our party to wishing Steve Jags well on his retirement. I understand that, as Keeper of the Great Clock, he was responsible for more than 2,000 clocks in this place and making sure that they are all synchronised and on time. The Leader of the House said that the job was perhaps more jealously desired than that of the Prime Minister, though I do not know whether we would ask the Prime Minister to wind up 2,000 clocks. Anyway, we congratulate Steve Jags and wish him all the very best. I know that he will find, as St Paul did, that time is undoubtedly short and we need to get on with life.

When Mr Johnson was Foreign Secretary, he commenced the process of appointing William Shawcross to investigate the victims of Libyan—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I hesitate to stop the hon. Gentleman, but when he says "Mr Johnson", I think he means "the Prime Minister" or "the right hon. Member".

Ian Paisley: I beg your pardon, Madam Deputy Speaker. When the Prime Minister was Foreign Secretary, he commenced the process of appointing William Shawcross to investigate how victims of Libyan-sponsored IRA terrorism should be compensated. On 3 January, a letter calling for the publication of the Shawcross report was published in *The Daily Telegraph*. The letter was signed by members of the Conservative party, the Labour party, the Liberal party, the Social Democratic and Labour party and my own party, so it really did attract cross-party support. Yesterday, the Prime Minister said that it was too complicated and some way off finding a solution. Will the Leader of the House arrange a full statement on this matter? If that is not possible, will he agree to allow the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee to call the author of the report, Mr Shawcross, to give evidence, and ensure that that is not prohibited or blocked by the Foreign Office?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The House has wide powers, subject to a small number of limitations, to call people in front of it to give evidence, although the evidence they can give is sometimes limited by the confines of confidentiality. It is for the Select Committee to decide who it wants to call. Regarding the activities of the Prime Minister and his interest in this, I think the fact that he ordered the report when he was Foreign Secretary, is paying close attention to the report now and is ensuring that the report is thorough and full indicates the concern of Her Majesty's Government about this whole area and does, I hope, give the hon. Gentleman some reassurance.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con) [V]: My right hon. Friend and I agree about the risk of paying danegeld to anybody, but Somerset County Council was given £32 million to fight covid and the Vikings in charge of the council have stashed £10 million away to spend on whatever they fancy. They have even bankrolled a fund for the car parks and financed publicity for their "One Somerset" half-baked unitary plan, even though we are facing a public health disaster down here. Local government reform must be shelved now and all covid grants must be ring-fenced to be spent on covid. Somerset's Vikings have to be stopped. Let us bring to bear the spirit of King Arthur—I mean King Alfred—and have a debate on this subject immediately.

Mr Rees-Mogg: King Arthur is a bit before my time, so I am glad we are not going to dwell on the once and future king.

My hon. Friend is right to hold to account all public bodies that spend taxpayers' money. Taxpayers' money should not, as a general rule, be spent on the propaganda of the political interests on any individual council, so he is right to hold the council to account for that. I think it is important that the Government work through existing local authorities during this pandemic to deliver the policy needed to help people locally, and that needs to be done while, at the same time, watching carefully over how taxpayers' money is spent.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab) [V]: I have been contacted by a foster carer who wants to know whether the Government have considered putting foster carers in a higher priority group for the covid vaccine. I tabled a named day question to the Health Secretary on 1 December and still have not received a response. My office has written to him to chase it up, but Ministers at the Department of Health and Social Care are taking months to respond. Will the Leader of the House tell me how best to raise this issue in Government time and update the House on what conversations he has had with Cabinet colleagues who continue to dodge MPs' questions and correspondence? We need answers for our constituents.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady does not need my advice on how best to raise this subject publicly, because she has done so, very effectively. Immediately after this session, I will take up with the Department of Health and Social Care the question she has put down and try to get her an answer punctually. On her specific question about foster carers, it is absolutely right that the highest-risk categories are vaccinated first—that is to say the people who are most at risk of death if they catch covid. That is the right priority and is widely accepted. There is inevitably more discussion about who should be vaccinated once those highest-risk categories have been reached.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): The Leader of the House will be aware that I have been working with my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) on a private Member's Bill to look at drugs testing in prisons, and also on my own private Member's Bill to end the barbaric and medieval practice of virginity testing. I understand the situation at the moment with the pandemic, but will the Leader of the House make every effort to ensure that Back-Bench Members will be able to start their private Members' Bills days again at the earliest opportunity?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I can indeed give that undertaking, as I did yesterday. We will seek to bring back both Westminster Hall and private Members' Bills as soon as is both possible and practical. Having the right to introduce legislation is such an important way in which Members represent their constituencies, and it is something of which I am very supportive.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD) [V]: May I, too, convey my deep condolences to the family of Godfrey Cameron, the parliamentary security officer who died yesterday?

The extended furlough scheme covers employees returning from maternity or other statutory leave so long as their employer made a PAYE submission for the employee between 20 March and 30 October 2020. However, for new mothers on maternity allowance, rather than statutory maternity pay, there will be no such submission and therefore many new mothers are being now refused furlough by their employers. Will the Leader of the House raise this with Government colleagues and ask that the guidance is clarified as a matter of urgency?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady obviously raises an important point. It is worth saying that the furlough and self-employment schemes have protected 12 million jobs, at a cost of over £56 billion of taxpayers' money, but it is important that this should be fair in its application, and the point she has made is one I will certainly take up on her behalf.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con) [V]: Many constituents have raised the proposed use of Kooltherm K15 on flats at Zenith Close in my constituency. This is a type of cladding that was found to have been used in Grenfell Tower before the fire occurred. As thousands of leaseholders across the country continue to face demands for remedial works to replace cladding, can we have a statement from a Minister setting out guidance on the types of cladding for which safety concerns remain, and can we have a commitment from the Government that an amendment to the Fire Safety Bill to ensure that leaseholders are not held responsible for the costs of remedial works is accepted?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The Government are naturally working hard to make sure people are safe and feel safe in their homes. The Government are determined to learn the lessons from the Grenfell tragedy, and we are bringing forward the most significant building safety reforms in almost 40 years. It does remain building owners' responsibility to address unsafe cladding on buildings of all heights. The Government have provided expert advice on the measures building owners should take to ensure their buildings are safe. It is worth adding that 84% of buildings with Grenfell-type cladding have had it removed, rising to 99% in the social sector. However, I understand from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government that, in some circumstances, combustible insulation materials such as Kooltherm K15 can be retained. I will ask for further details on how this can happen and why this can happen for my hon. Friend, so that he has a full explanation.

On the Fire Safety Bill, the Government are naturally keen to reduce the burden on leaseholders. However, in the Government's view, the amendment would have some unintended consequences, but I can assure my hon. Friend that the Ministry of Housing, Communities

and Local Government is very focused on this issue. Michael Wade's work is under way, and the Communities Secretary has committed to address this as soon as we are in a position to do so.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: During the Christmas period, on 27 December, a young woman in my constituency was tragically murdered by her partner. She was 26 years old. As the right hon. Gentleman may know, the media have rightly exposed the appalling practices of some GPs who are charging victims of domestic abuse over £150 for a letter confirming their injuries to enable them to get legal aid and other vital support. Legal aid is a lifeline for women fleeing domestic abuse, but as I said in the House last November, the legal aid sector has faced many cuts over the years and the demand for it is growing. At a time when we should be removing barriers, we are making it much harder for victims to come forward to get support. Can we have a debate in Government time to look at the impact that cuts to the legal aid sector are having on our most vulnerable constituents?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, whose question is well timed because the responsible Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), has just joined me on the Front Bench. The Domestic Abuse Bill will be looking into the legal aid matter, and the Government are looking into the charge being made to victims of domestic abuse who need to go to their GP to get certificates. Immediately following this session, my hon. Friend the Minister will be answering questions in greater detail.

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con) [V]: As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for Tamils, I know that my right hon. Friend will want to join me in wishing Tamils in Carshalton and Wallington, in the UK and around the world a very happy Thai Pongal. As we approach the UN Human Rights Council sessions in the spring, may we have a debate about human rights in Sri Lanka, especially given the recent worrying reports of the destruction of a memorial in Jaffna?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Vanakkam and happy Thai Pongal to everyone in Britain's Tamil community and around the world. I hope that their happiness on Thai Pongal has not been reduced by the fact that we bowled the Sri Lankans out so quickly earlier today in the test match. I feel rather guilty that, on a day that should be celebratory for them, we have taken so many wickets. I would like to thank the Tamil community for all they are doing in our struggle against covid throughout this crisis. Their values of hard work, discipline and community spirit have shone through. Regarding the destruction of the memorial monument at Jaffna University, the Minister for south Asia, my noble Friend Lord Ahmad, expressed his concerns on 9 January. The UK has long supported efforts to promote peace and reconciliation in Sri Lanka, including in our role as penholder on Sri Lanka at the UN Human Rights Council—UNHRC. We regret Sri Lanka's announcement in February that it no longer supports the UNHRC resolution on post-conflict accountability, and we made clear our commitment to the resolution in statements at the UNHRC in February,

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

June and September 2020. We are working alongside our international partners on how best to take forward this issue at the March session of the UNHRC.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab) [V]: Can we have a debate on the report today from the TUC, “Working mums: Paying the price”, which calls for a temporary legal right to furlough for parents and others with caring responsibilities who cannot work due to covid-19 restrictions? It is clear that parents, and perhaps women in particular, are among the biggest losers as a result of covid. Seven out of 10 women requesting furlough following school closure are turned down. This is a proposal that needs urgent action from the Government. Can we please have an urgent debate on it?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Furlough is available for firms to use for their employees, but furlough in any individual circumstance must involve a discussion between the business concerned and the employee concerned. It is much better done at a local and immediate level so that the needs both of the firm and the individual employee can be accommodated in a way that ensures that economic activity continues, but also that families are able to take their responsibilities for their children into account. This is much better done at a local level and at a business level rather than by a heavy-handed intervention by the state.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con) [V]: A new freeport next to East Midlands airport would provide a massive jobs boost to Ashfield, Eastwood and the whole of Nottinghamshire. My hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Ruth Edwards) has done a fantastic job in bringing together politicians of all colours to champion a bid for this much-needed facility. Will my right hon. Friend please allow time in the Chamber to debate the merits of freeport in our area, and will he please commend my hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe for pushing this all the way?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I commend both my hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) and my hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Ruth Edwards) for pushing for freeports. Freeports are a really exciting initiative. They will be national hubs for trade, innovation and commerce, regenerating communities across the United Kingdom. They can attract new businesses, spreading jobs, investment and opportunity to towns and cities up and down the land. I welcome efforts that Members are making to ensure that they have freeports in their areas, and I will pass on specific requests to the Treasury. The Government have published their bidding prospectus for freeports and the bidding period will close on 5 February. This is the opportunity for these bids to go in and for the success, the opportunity and the excitement of freeports be trumpeted up and down the land.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Next Monday—18 January—is generally thought to be the day when most of us feel at our lowest post Christmas, and this year all of us have been affected by social isolation arising from coronavirus. Each year, Samaritans volunteers seek to repurpose the day, calling it Brew Monday, where we talk to people at places such as stations and

shopping centres. In fact, we have had our own event here in Parliament. I believe that you came along last year, Madam Deputy Speaker. This year we cannot meet face to face, but we can meet virtually. Will the Leader of the House join me online on Monday morning for our virtual Brew Monday, and help to get the message out that it is good to talk when we feel low? I also extend the invitation to other hon. Members in the House.

Mr Rees-Mogg: May I really thank the hon. Lady for raising this issue in the House? I join her in thanking the Samaritans for the absolutely amazing work that they do that saves so many lives, and the commitment of Samaritans volunteers who take on the incredibly onerous responsibility and burden of speaking to people and encouraging them when they are at their lowest point, and having to deal with the tragedies that sometimes occur; they do remarkable work. The initiative to have an online brew day is absolutely first class, and if I possibly can join the hon. Lady, I will—although I am not sure that everybody would be that cheered to hear from me, so it would have to be a very selective audience that I talked to. [Laughter.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Sorry; I did not mean to laugh. I am quite sure that the Lord President will have an excellent response on Monday. The hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) has worked very hard on this. I recall it being an excellent day last time. Let us hope that we can do the same on Monday.

Robert Lorgan (High Peak) (Con) [V]: Can we have a debate on access to healthcare in rural areas? This is particularly important given the roll-out of the covid vaccine. I pay tribute to three brilliant local charities—the New Mills and District Volunteer Centre, Connex Community Support in Buxton, and The Bureau in Glossop—which are all offering High Peak residents free transport to attend vaccine appointments. This is a really important service, and I want to put on record my thanks to all involved and to all those working so hard to roll out the vaccine.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I very much welcome my hon. Friend’s tribute to the three charities in his constituency. During the pandemic we have seen the most amazing national effort to tackle the coronavirus. It has been our nation at its absolute best. As of Friday, 96% of the population in England will live within 10 miles of a vaccination site, and by spring we will have 2,700 vaccination sites across the United Kingdom. On top of the 1,000 vaccination sites that are already on line, this will include, in England: an additional 206 active hospital sites; 50 vaccination centres; and around 1,200 local vaccination sites, including primary care networks, community pharmacy sites and mobile teams. I join my hon. Friend in praising the work of these charities and all that they are doing to support this vital roll-out.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP) [V]: As we fight to eradicate covid, I am sure that the Leader of the House would wish to congratulate the Valneva team in my Livingston constituency, who, alongside the Oxford-AstraZeneca team, are doing their bit to develop a vaccine. We hope very much that the Livi vaccine will be with us very soon. Does he agree that we need a debate

on how to ensure that no one is left behind in the race to get our population vaccinated? I am sure that he would agree that women who are pregnant and other groups who are considered at risk should very much be a focus for us all as the clinical trial frameworks are developed.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, who makes a really important point. I join her in congratulating the Valneva team for the work that they have been doing. The Government are making great efforts to reach the hard-to-reach groups, including by dedicating an extra £10 million to homelessness in order to try to reach people who have no particular home and ensure that they are registered with a GP so that they have access to the vaccine. The point that she makes a really important one. It is well understood by the Government and I am sure that it will be raised in this House on many occasions.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab) [V]: Bringing down the cost of school uniforms for parents and carers is more important than ever in these challenging economic times. What intervention can the Leader of the House make with the Government to ensure that my Education (Guidance about Costs of School Uniforms) Bill, which is supported by the Government, Members across the House, the *Sunday Mirror*, the National Education Union and the Children's Society, is given parliamentary time in this Session?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I refer the hon. Gentleman to what I said earlier about private Members' Bills. I am keen that they should come back as soon as is possible and practical. We had to suspend them under current circumstances, but I hope we can get back to them as soon as conditions allow—those conditions are outside my control—and then his Bill can come to the Floor of the House in the normal way, according to its priority, and be considered.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con) [V]: I am speaking from a very snowy Derbyshire today. Could the Leader of the House facilitate a statement by the most appropriate Cabinet Minister to give the country some good news about covid? I am concerned that, even when we are vaccinated, we are not going to be allowed to visit other vaccinated people, and I think that the country needs to see a light at the end of the tunnel. Could the Leader of the House please facilitate that as soon as practically possible?

Mr Rees-Mogg: There was good news in the papers today indicating that a study shows that people who have had covid maintain an immunity. The report I read said that that lasted for at least five months, but that was the extent of the study, so that is not a maximum; it is very much a minimum. There is some good news, with the roll-out of the vaccine and that sort of information. It is really a matter of achieving critical mass and having enough people vaccinated, at which point life will change and we will get back to normal, which is something we all welcome, but the lesson of the last few months is that putting a date on things is tempting fate.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD) [V]: The last time I asked a business question, I asked the Leader of the House whether MPs could have more than the scheduled one hour to debate amendments to the Fire Safety Bill

designed to protect leaseholders from the cost of fire safety remediation. However, in the last few days, we have seen reports of gagging clauses being put into cladding removal contracts and of Grenfell insulation being used to fix flammable homes, and last night I found out that in my constituency of St Albans, it is going to cost £7 million to remove the cladding on just one block of flats. That is more than £150,000 per flat. May we have an urgent statement or debate in Government time on how the Government think cladding remediation work will be funded, so that all MPs are fully informed before we debate the amendments to the Fire Safety Bill?

Mr Rees-Mogg: If I may give the hon. Lady good news, the *Daily Mail* reports today that the gagging clauses have been lifted by order of the Secretary of State; as soon as he heard about them, he said that they should stop and that freedom of speech is important. I reiterate the point I made earlier: 99% of Grenfell-style cladding has been removed already from social housing, and 84% from properties in total. Good progress is being made, although the hon. Lady is obviously right to continue to raise this important topic.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con) [V]: It is snowing up here in Staffordshire as well.

I have two contrasting problems regarding air quality in my constituency of Newcastle-under-Lyme. The Government have asked the council to institute either a clean air zone or some other mitigating factors in one part of my constituency, but there is very little appetite for that, and it is clear that the changes wrought by coronavirus mean that the mitigation seems already to have largely happened. Conversely, we have an issue with odour coming from the site of a landfill, which is causing a great deal of concern to my constituents, and we have been unable to get the requisite action from the Environment Agency. Would my right hon. Friend be willing to schedule a debate in which we can raise issues of air quality more generally and hold the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to account in responding to the needs of my constituents?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is battling for his constituents and is absolutely right to do so. Improving air quality is one of the most tangible and beneficial things we can achieve with a sensible environmental policy. Newcastle-under-Lyme and Stoke-on-Trent have jointly identified a package of measures, including bus gates and bus retrofit, to bring nitrogen dioxide exceedance in their local authority areas within legal limits. It has to be said that restrictions on motorists are always deeply tiresome. Stoke-on-Trent requested, and has been granted, a short period—to 15 February—to model alternatives to the proposed bus gate on Victoria Road. A clean air zone is not being imposed by the Government.

As regards the odour from the landfill, I understand that the Government are aware of this. I know from my own constituency that the Environment Agency has experts trained to sniff out odours from landfill sites to see if they are within permissible limits and whether there is a problem.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): A report published by Christian Solidarity Worldwide on Tuesday 12 January claims that, in 2020, Cuban authorities continued to routinely and systematically violate the right to freedom

[*Jim Shannon*]

of religion or belief. I know that the Leader of the House and I have a similar opinion on this. Documented violations include arbitrary detention, threats, harassment, surveillance of religious leaders, efforts by the Government to block overseas humanitarian aid, defamation of religious leaders online and the targeting of church properties. Will the Leader of the House agree to a statement or debate on this matter?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am always grateful to the hon. Gentleman for campaigning for religious freedom around the world. It is clear that Christians in Cuba face appalling discrimination from the country's communist totalitarian regime. Communists have always been anti-Christianity and anti-religion. The UK is committed to defending freedom of religion or belief for all and to promoting respect between different religious and non-religious communities. Promoting the right to freedom of religion or belief is one of the UK's long-standing human rights policy priorities.

The Government regularly speak to the Cuban Government, in both London and Havana, about a range of human rights issues, and also address these issues through multilateral human rights forums, including the UN periodic review. While we welcome the new protections that underpin freedom of religion or belief in the 2019 constitution, we call on the Cuban authorities to confer in practice those rights that the constitution enshrines. This is a reminder to those who like the idea of a written constitution that what is written is not always what is done.

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): I receive emails every single week from residents concerned about speeding in their local area, from Manchester Road to Colne Road to Padiham Road and many more. This is not only a nuisance to local residents but risks serious injury or even death to the victims, be they drivers or pedestrians. Could my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on how we can tackle this issue, particularly as we see traffic increasing in the months ahead?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend raises an important point. Excess speeding is a risk on the roads and may lead to death or serious injury. The enforcement of speeding offences is ultimately a matter for local chief officers. The Government are clear that anyone who breaks speed limits should expect to face penalties, as set out in law. Fortunately, the United Kingdom has some of the safest roads in the world, with deaths steadily declining throughout the 21st century. While every death is one too many, we are making good progress.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Yesterday, 1,564 people tragically died of covid-19—the highest death toll on record—and in York, infection rates are still rising sharply. This half-hearted approach to the lockdown is hurting the economy and causing the virus to spread at an alarming pace. Can we have an urgent statement from the Prime Minister to announce a proper, comprehensive lockdown with no ambiguity, with only critical work in direct response to the pandemic, or related food or services, to be undertaken and a full economic support package put on the table?

Mr Rees-Mogg: There is a full economic support package available: £280 billion of taxpayers' money has been provided and the furlough scheme extended to the end of April. The lockdown is quite extraordinary. The infringements on people's liberties are unprecedented in this country. People cannot have visitors in their own home. A lady yesterday, it was reported, knocked on the window of her mother in an old people's home, her mother having Alzheimer's, and she was fined by the police, although the fine was subsequently remitted. The restrictions on people are extraordinary. That is because of the threat that the pandemic has created. People know the rules. They are absolutely clear and people, by and large, are following them. The overwhelming majority of people in this country are following the rules in both the spirit and the letter. We should recognise that this country operates by consent with our laws, and that is something we can be proud of—that people have gone along with what the Government have suggested because they knew it was the right thing to do. We have not required the type of aggressive enforcement seen in other countries because the British people have joined in with this effort as a whole. The restrictions are already very tight, they are very clear, and the economic support package is enormous.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con) [V]: May I welcome the Leader of the House's robust answer to the previous question? Mine is on a different subject. Monday's non-partisan debate in Westminster Hall referred to the need for a dedicated Minister with status in both main Departments that deal with the hospitality sector—the third largest in our economy. In his well-received response, the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), was naturally rather reticent about restructuring the Government to reflect such an enhanced role for himself. May we therefore have a statement from the Cabinet Office Minister on the need for a dedicated and upgraded Minister for the hospitality sector and the promotion of its survival and recovery?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My right hon. Friend noted that the Minister responding was diffident about the reorganisation of Government. He may not be surprised if I am diffident too in this regard, because that is a right that belongs to the Prime Minister. I would like to commend the debate on Monday, because the Government fully recognise the importance of the UK hospitality sector, which makes a vital contribution to the UK economy. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for raising this, because in my own constituency I have had certain correspondence and great concern from a wedding services company that has found maintaining its livelihood during this pandemic so exceptionally difficult.

Ministers in both the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport have worked closely with business leaders across the hospitality sector throughout the pandemic to ensure that their interests are represented. That engagement has helped to form the Government's comprehensive package of support, including measures such as the reduction in VAT, the job retention scheme, the hospitality grant, and indeed the eat out to help out scheme. I will obviously pass this matter on to the relevant Secretaries of State, but my

right hon. Friend might want to write to the Prime Minister directly with his suggestions for the reorganisation of Government.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): In order to enable the necessary arrangements for the next business to be made, I will suspend the House for three minutes.

12.43 pm

Sitting suspended.

Domestic Abuse and Hidden Harms during Lockdown

12.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement. The coronavirus pandemic has presented this country with enormous and unprecedented challenges. In order to control the spread of the virus, we have had to ask the public to follow a simple but crucial instruction: stay at home. Earlier this month we entered a new national lockdown, and while we are absolutely clear that these measures are necessary, it is also important to recognise the potential impact on what we refer to as hidden harm crimes, which include domestic abuse, child sexual exploitation and modern slavery. These are some of the most pernicious, harmful types of offending in society, and they often occur behind closed doors. Given that fact, let me reiterate a crucial message that the Prime Minister delivered to the public last week: notwithstanding the restrictions in place, those at risk of abuse can leave home to seek safety and avoid the risk of harm.

Protecting those at risk of abuse and exploitation remains a priority for this Government, which is why I am so pleased that today I can announce the launch of a new codeword scheme for victims of domestic abuse called Ask for ANI. From today, thousands of pharmacies across the UK will provide this service, enabling victims to seek help discreetly. Through a signal to a pharmacist, a victim will be provided with a safe space in the pharmacy, and taken through the support available to them, whether that is a call to the police or a domestic abuse helpline service. The codeword scheme will offer a vital lifeline to all victims, ensuring that they get help in a safe and discreet way.

Let me set out more of the steps that we have taken to ensure that victims and those at risk can continue to access critical advice and support. We have provided unprecedented levels of additional funding to critical frontline services helping victims of domestic abuse. As part of wider charitable funding, the Home Office, the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government have between them distributed more than £25 million in emergency covid-19 funding for domestic abuse organisations. That has provided almost 1,900 bed spaces in safe accommodation, and enabled domestic abuse organisations of all sizes to provide advice and support to victims. For example, Home Office funding allowed the charity Safelives to train hundreds of frontline workers online, including new independent domestic violence advisers. To help sustain those charities through the second part of the year, we are providing further funding of nearly £11 million from the Ministry of Justice and the Home Office.

Although funding forms an important strand of our response, it is also vital that victims of domestic abuse, and those worried about them, know how to access help and advice. In April, the Home Secretary launched the #YouAreNotAlone communications campaign to do precisely that. The campaign has reached almost 25 million people through paid advertising, and has been supported by a range of celebrities and influencers who have shared its messages with more than 130 million followers on social media. Materials have been translated into

[Victoria Atkins]

16 languages. The campaign directs victims to sources of specialist help and support. It also makes clear that the “stay at home” restrictions do not apply to those at risk of abuse who need to leave home to seek help or refuge. We have relaunched the campaign over the winter to reaffirm those messages, and I ask hon. Members across the House to do everything they can to highlight that campaign, and make clear to victims that help continues to be at hand, should they need it.

The police have been, and will continue to be proactive in tackling domestic abuse during this period. Courts have continued to prioritise domestic and child abuse cases throughout, as well as civil protection orders relating to domestic abuse, stalking, forced marriage and female genital mutilation. We have seen many innovative police responses to domestic abuse during the pandemic. The Metropolitan police has developed an online function for the domestic violence disclosure scheme, whereby police can disclose previous domestic violence history to new partners. Nottinghamshire police is applying the disclosure scheme in every domestic abuse occurrence. Other forces are able to use discreet technology to take witness statements remotely, without leaving any trace on the victim’s phone. Some forces, such as Gloucestershire police, have used spare capacity to instigate dedicated domestic violence response vehicles, while independent domestic violence advisers are helping to support victims.

There are, sadly, other forms of hidden harms within domestic abuse, and we are acutely aware that the pandemic has increased risks to some children and young people, and reduced their contact with trusted professionals and adults. The Government are committed to doing everything they can to continue to support and protect children at risk, and they have provided more than £11 million since last June to Barnardo’s See, Hear, Respond service, to support more than 50,000 vulnerable or hidden children, whose usual support networks have been affected by national and local pandemic restrictions.

The Home Office has also launched a national communications campaign, Something’s Not Right, to help children who have been exposed to a range of harms, reaching millions of secondary school children in England. At this time, we are particularly concerned about online harms. With children spending more time on the internet, parents have been signposted to materials for staying safe online, including from the National Crime Agency’s Thinkuknow campaign.

A record number of reports of online child sexual abuse have been processed by the UK’s Internet Watch Foundation, including a large increase in self-generated indecent images of children. The Home Office is providing £80,000 to support the development of the IWF’s campaign to support parents in starting conversations with their children around keeping safe online, and to help young people to identify the signs of coercion and to report abuse. In December, we published the full Government response to the online harms White Paper, which sets out our expectations on companies to keep their users safe, especially children. At the same time, we published the interim code of practice on online child sexual exploitation and abuse, which sets out steps that companies can take now to tackle these crimes on a voluntary basis, ahead of any regulatory system being introduced.

Another form of hidden harm is modern slavery. The Government are committed to the safety and security of victims of modern slavery, particularly during the pandemic, by ensuring that victims are provided with the support they need and that those responsible for these crimes are prosecuted. Last year, we made an additional £1.73 million available for modern slavery services in England and Wales. The funding has enabled providers to adapt the ways in which they provide support during the pandemic, including by reducing face-to-face contact where appropriate and ensuring that support can be accessed remotely. The new Victim Care Contract came into force last week and will help to ensure that victims receive the care they need. In early adopter sites, child victims of modern slavery continue to be supported by the Independent Child Trafficking Guardian scheme which is working flexibly to continue to provide effective and responsive support remotely, both to trafficked children directly and to other professionals. Law enforcement agencies continue to pursue high-risk modern slavery cases where there is a risk of harm or detriment to individuals.

Throughout the coronavirus pandemic, we have remained resolute in our commitment to tackling abuse that takes place behind closed doors and out of sight. We continue to work across Government to monitor, assess and respond to the ongoing situation, but I ask all hon. Members to consider ways in which they can point victims in their constituencies to support. We will continue to prioritise domestic abuse during and after the pandemic. To do this, we remain committed to delivering our landmark Domestic Abuse Bill to further strengthen protections for victims and bring perpetrators to justice.

In addition, this year we will publish the new Tackling Violence against Women and Girls strategy, which will help us to better target perpetrators and support victims of these abhorrent crimes. We are currently running a call for evidence to inform the new strategy, and I urge hon. Members to share this via their networks within their constituencies to help us reach as wide an audience as possible. This will be followed by a dedicated and complementary domestic abuse strategy that will ensure progress following the passage of the landmark Domestic Abuse Bill. We will soon publish the first-of-its-kind strategy on tackling all forms of child sexual abuse, outlining our long-term ambition to drive a whole-system response in tackling this heinous crime.

In conclusion, I would like to thank everyone involved in helping victims of hidden crimes in this pandemic and beyond, from those working in domestic abuse refuges and community services and in modern slavery safe accommodation, to those scouring the internet to remove images of children being raped, as well as our police officers, our National Crime Agency officers, our Border Force officers and those working in the security services to support this work. I thank them all for what they are doing to help support victims and to stop perpetrators of these terrible crimes. I would like to finish by reassuring all victims of hidden harms that they are not alone, their voices are heard and help will continue to be there for them. I commend this statement to the House.

1 pm

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab) [V]: I thank the Minister for advance sight of her statement. We in the Labour party are really pleased to hear about the

launch of the Ask for ANI scheme today, which will be a real innovation in helping victims come forward. Can the Minister tell the House what work her Department has done to ensure that in launching this brilliant scheme, when a victim comes forward there will be support beyond an initial phone call available, especially in cases where victims are not ready to inform the police?

We are now eight days into a third national lockdown, with a “Stay at home” message that we have become incredibly familiar with. It was welcome in this third lockdown that the Prime Minister clarified that individuals who wish to leave their homes to escape domestic abuse could do so. That message was not given back in March, and I welcome that being rectified and that the right thing has now been said.

We on the Opposition Benches welcome what the Minister has said today about the measures being taken to tackle domestic abuse and hidden harms. Back in April, the shadow Home Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) wrote to the Home Secretary urging her to act on this important issue. He also raised concerns from the sector, including the need to bring forward urgently a package of emergency financial support for organisations doing the vital work on the frontline which the Minister has talked about.

It was the Labour party that urged the Government to put in place £75 million of financial support for the sector. When the Government announced that they would do that, we welcomed the support, but the Home Secretary confirmed back in June, months into the crisis, that only a staggering £1.2 million had been spent. Today, the Minister’s statement tells us that 11 months into this crisis, still only a third of that funding has reached the frontline. Can she explain that? Will she tell us when the £51 million unspent will be allocated? Will she confirm that the £11 million extra that she has announced today is in excess of the £75 million already announced?

The Minister has also mentioned refuge capacity, and we thank all those who struggled very hard under very difficult circumstances to create urgently needed beds that should never have been missing. We must now ask: is that still enough? I have myself this week tried to get a refuge bed and not been able to find one. Will the Minister tell us today and in the coming weeks what contact she has had with refuges about capacity? Can she today say that she is confident that there is capacity to meet the demand? Can she tell the House what specific provisions have been made for specialised services for those victims who are black, Asian and minority ethnic, migrants, LGBTQ, male or disabled?

As the Minister has mentioned, children are often the hidden victims of domestic and sexual abuse in the home. Can she tell us what work her Department is doing to ensure that vulnerable children who are out of school are safe? What, if any, detached youth work and proactive targeting of children—at the very least, those on child protection plans—has she asked for in order to reach children living in dangerous and violent homes?

The Minister mentioned the £11 million of funding to the brilliant “See, Hear, Respond” scheme, but as she said herself, it will target 50,000 children, not the three-quarters of a million children today living in dangerous homes. Can she tell us whether any of the schemes that she has announced for children cover every child in our

country, so that all child victims can benefit, not just those in some areas, where a postcode lottery determines whether we fund a child’s safety?

To continue on a theme, the Minister mentioned the support of independent child trafficking guardians—a brilliant scheme that we welcome. Can she confirm that that scheme is available to all children trafficked in our country, as was promised some years ago by this Government, or is it still, as I understand, just a pilot for some areas, leaving some trafficked children without support?

Domestic abuse and community support services are currently planning for redundancies in March—quite unbelievable in the middle of a global pandemic and a national lockdown. The sector, the Labour party, the Domestic Abuse Commissioner and the Victims’ Commissioner have all called repeatedly for sustainable funding for at least the next year. The staff being made redundant are the very people the Minister needs for Ask for ANI to have any chance of success. Can the Minister confirm whether there have been any discussions with the sector or the Treasury about multi-year funding, and an end to the dangerous year-on-year short-termism in community services for adults and children?

The Government were too slow to act in the first and second lockdowns. I am very pleased that now, in the third lockdown, they are more alert to this issue. Labour, the shadow Home Secretary and I have been saying to the Government since April that they need to do more to protect those who cannot leave home. It is not enough to say that victims should reach out; we in this House, especially the Government, have a responsibility to ensure that when they do that there is help for them. If there is not, we risk losing them for good.

With the thought of the lockdown carrying on until March, it is imperative that the Government act, and act fast. All Members across this House need to assure their constituents that all, not just some, victims suffering from domestic abuse and other hidden harms can leave that abuse and access safety. There are people waiting and willing to help. That is the message that we need to send, and it is on all of us to ensure that that is the case.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Before I call the Minister, I must point out that the hon. Lady significantly exceeded the time allocated to her. I know this is a very serious subject, but everybody on the list recognises that, and will want to make points. I must ask for brief questions; if they are not brief, the people who are at the end of the list—everyone can see who they are—will not get to ask their questions. It is a matter of dividing the time in this House equally and fairly between Members.

Victoria Atkins: Thank you for that, Madam Deputy Speaker. Accordingly, I will answer some of the hon. Lady’s issues, and then write to her on the matters that I cannot address, because I am mindful that, as you say, other colleagues would like to come in.

May I deal first with the codeword scheme? I really welcome the fact that the hon. Lady and the Opposition welcome that scheme. It has been really carefully thought through, after really careful work with domestic abuse charities, including Hestia, which has done great work with its own safe spaces scheme. We are clear that the scheme must be victim-led. In other words, when a victim is taken into the consultation room in pharmacies

[Victoria Atkins]

they will be asked by a fully trained pharmacist what they would like to do. For some it may be a 999 call. For others it may well be other forms of help, through the helplines and community services. We will look at the scheme very carefully to ensure that it is working well for victims. It is another source of information and access to help for victims, because we are so aware of how difficult it can be for victims to reach out.

The hon. Lady challenged me on the funding. We have had this conversation before, but the latest figures I have to hand on the funding that we have committed—both the charitable funding that was committed in spring last year and the Home Office’s additional £2 million fund for the helpline services and web-based services—are that a total of just under £27 million has been allocated and, indeed, paid out of Government coffers. That is across the MHCLG, the MOJ and the Home Office. We are working hard to allocate the £11 million, but that was in addition to this funding, which of course is in addition to the funding that is available in normal times.

I am really pleased that, on refuges, part of the funding that has been granted through the Chancellor’s charitable funding that was announced in the spring has allowed just under a further 1,900 spaces in safe accommodation. Clearly, we keep that under review, and want to get to a situation in which the sorts of challenges that the hon. Lady has set out do not apply. That is precisely why we are bringing in the duty on tier 1 local authorities through the Domestic Abuse Bill, and as she will know, MHCLG has already provided funding ahead of the next financial year to help tier 1 local authorities prepare for that.

There are many things that we have done for vulnerable children. In particular, we have worked with social care services and early help services to ensure that they continue to support vulnerable children and young people, along with their families. I have seen this myself, not just in the context of child sexual exploitation and abuse but, for example, in the context of gang exploitation. We have also brought thousands of social workers back on to a temporary register, the Social Work Together online tool, which we have developed in partnership with Social Work England and the Local Government Association to draw on those people’s expertise and experience where needed. We have invested not just in the “See, Hear, Respond” service that the hon. Lady supports, but in the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children’s helplines, Childline and the equivalent for adults.

Finally, ICTGs—the trafficking guardians—have been rolled out over a third of local authorities, and we have been clear that we want to roll this out further. As the hon. Lady will know, the model of use of the national referral mechanism by child victims has changed in recent years with the sad arrival of county lines gangs, so we have been changing the system to try to reflect the needs of those victims, as well as victims from overseas. All of this work is continuing through this pandemic, and I thank the hon. Lady for joining our call to ensure these messages are rolled out across our constituencies to help our victims, wherever they may live.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con) [V]: Madam Deputy Speaker, you and I have both worked on this important policy area in the past, and I

commend the Minister on her statement and the added protections she is putting in place. However, evidence is now becoming available that some of the people who are suffering most adversely in this lockdown are adults and children with autism. So that more appropriate and better services can be offered to them to alleviate their suffering, what data are the Government collecting on individuals and families with an autistic member suffering from domestic abuse, and the hidden harms the Minister has referred to, during this lockdown? If the answer is none, can this be remedied immediately? If that data is being collected, can it be published on a regular basis so that specialised support for this vulnerable group of adults and children can be improved?

Victoria Atkins: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the needs of people living with autism and other such conditions, as she always does when the opportunity presents itself. I hope that she welcomes the mental health reforms that the Government have announced this week, which will be a real step forward in us all understanding the differences between autism and Asperger’s, and the ways in which they are wrongly treated at this point in time under the historic legislation. I also hope that she is aware of the national strategy for disabled people, which the Prime Minister is absolutely committed to publishing. Only yesterday or the day before, in fact, I attended a meeting chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), to work out across Government how we can help people with disabilities, including those who live with autism.

As to the specific points on data, sadly, there is much room for improvement when it comes to the collection of data in respect of victims. I will take away my right hon. Friend’s specific question, because I am very clear in my mind as to how those health conditions can make a person more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, and ensuring that disabled victims of domestic abuse are better looked after will be part of our work. I will draw upon her advice and wisdom in this respect, because we want to be clear that no matter what health conditions and disabilities people are living with, they should not be victims of these terrible crimes.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab) [V]: Abusers exploit lockdowns to increase their control, so I welcome the “Ask for ANI” scheme, which the Home Affairs Committee called for.

On the vital issue of funding for services, can the Minister explain whether the £11 million that she announced is the same £11 million announced for the second lockdown, or is there any additional funding for this difficult third lockdown? The domestic abuse commissioner called for funding to be extended beyond March. Can she tell us whether that is happening?

Victoria Atkins: I thank the right hon. Lady and her Committee for the work that they do to scrutinise, rightly, the work of Government in this regard. I hope that I was clear that the £11 million was the £11 million announced in November, and that was very much directed towards helping organisations for the rest of the financial year.

We are working very closely with domestic abuse services to understand the strains that they are facing. I know from speaking to chief execs of the charities that, like a lot of frontline services, frontline workers are just

feeling exhausted by having to work in these conditions and with the extra pressures that they have faced over recent months. This money is taking us up to the end of this financial year.

On domestic abuse services beyond the end of this financial year, the right hon. Lady will know that we have just had the spending review process. We are in the middle of working out allocations, but I hope that she draws some comfort, as I said to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) earlier, that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has already committed £6 million to helping tier 1 local authorities prepare for that really important duty, set out in the Bill, to help victims in safe accommodation.

Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con) [V]: I know that my hon. Friend is aware that lockdown has been so challenging to new families with small babies; in certain tragic cases, it has been deadly to those babies and toddlers. The early years healthy development review that I am chairing on behalf of the Government has heard about the effect that lockdown has had on our very youngest. What steps is she taking to protect the youngest in our society from the effects of domestic violence?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my right hon. Friend for the amazing work that she is doing in this regard. It has long been a passion of hers, and I look forward to her drawing her conclusions in due course on this vital piece of work.

We are very conscious of the pressures on children in abusive households, including on pre-school children, which is why we have provided £3 million to support children affected by domestic abuse and, indeed, corresponding work on the development of perpetrator programmes. None the less, we are very aware of the need, as she says, sadly, to look after the youngest babies and children because of some of the figures that came out of the last full lockdown. This is why her work and our work to continue to tackle these terrible crimes is so vital, not least because seeing this abuse at a young age can have terrible effects on the children's long-term life chances as well.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab) [V]: Between April and November last year, referrals from the NSPCC to police and social services about child abuse increased by 79%. Schools play an important role in identifying potential abuse, so with the current lockdown, this is likely to be harder to pick up on. With local authorities already facing considerable financial pressures, what extra resources will the Government be giving them to help detect and prevent child abuse during this lockdown?

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to highlight the enormous work that schools are doing during lockdown restrictions as well as in the period that we had last year between lockdown restrictions. We have invested some £8 million to help teachers spot some of the signs of abuse and distress in children. It may take some time for those signs to show when children return to the classroom, but the money is intended to help to address that. The hon. Lady will, I hope, have heard about the investment we have made in

the “See, Hear, Respond” scheme. We have also provided £7.6 million to children's charities that have suffered financial hardship due to covid-19.

We continue to fund Childline, as well as the professional helpline for adults who are concerned about a child. In addition, we are funding a helpline set up by Operation Encompass in the middle of the first national lockdown last year. It is a helpline for teachers worried about the families of children in their school, particularly in relation to domestic abuse, and want to know what they can do to help. The Operation Encompass helpline exists very much to help the teachers who help to look after our children, and I recommend it to teachers in the hon. Lady's constituency and elsewhere.

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): I warmly welcome the launch of the new codeword scheme today. I have a constituent whose abusive partner is the subject of a non-molestation order, but because the place where she lives is the place where they had a joint business, he has managed to get the zonal aspect of the order lifted, on the ground that he needs to be in the location for business. The abuse has restarted, and during lockdown it is difficult for my constituent's friends and family to support her in the right way. Will my hon. Friend meet me to discuss how to give better support to victims of abuse in these circumstances?

Victoria Atkins: I most certainly will meet my hon. Friend, and I thank him for raising a case that demonstrates the complexity of many people's experiences of abuse, even after a relationship has ended. The Bill contains a number of measures to address that sort of abusive behaviour, including the introduction of domestic abuse protection orders that will put positive requirements on offenders, as well as negative ones. I am happy to meet him, and I hope that, through his work and support from services, his constituent is able to find a solution to the terrible situation he has described.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab) [V]: There is a lot to commend in the statement, in particular the “Ask for ANI” scheme, but I put it to the Minister that what is really important is early detection of abuse and abusive behaviour, because that is most likely to lead to behaviour change on the part of the perpetrator. That is why it is so important, particularly during lockdown, that victims are at least given credibility and that early action is taken to support them and to work with perpetrators to break the cycle. That is vital during covid, as it is in normal times.

Victoria Atkins: I agree. May I say that it is a pleasure to see the hon. Gentleman again? He is absolutely right to say that this is not just about supporting victims; we want to deal with perpetrators' behaviour as well and to stop the cycle of abuse. That is why in addition to all the work we are doing during the pandemic this year, we are investing £7.1 million in perpetrator programmes. We want to tackle that offending behaviour.

I want to highlight the existence of a helpline, the “Respect” helpline, which can help people worried about the way they are beginning to behave. The number is on the gov.uk website. Sadly, it has seen an increase in calls during the pandemic, but it offers help for people who are worried about their own behaviour—to stop a situation from spiralling, as the hon. Gentleman describes so eloquently.

Dehenna Davison (Bishop Auckland) (Con) [V]: I am grateful to the Minister for implementing the “Ask for ANI” scheme, which will be a vital lifeline for victims of domestic abuse, but another lifeline is the availability of domestic abuse refuges, such as Wear Valley Women’s Aid in Bishop Auckland.

Paula, who is from that organisation, wrote to me this week to express concern that if covid spread throughout her team, they might be unable to provide their much-needed service. On that note, can my hon. Friend assure Paula and me that those who provide domestic abuse refuge services will be considered for the priority list in the next phase of the vaccine roll-out, to help ensure that there are no gaps in support for domestic abuse victims because of covid?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that really important point. The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation, which is advising the Government on the ways in which the vaccination programme should be rolled out, has focused on the highest clinical need priority groups, which include residents in care homes and healthcare workers. Once that phase is completed—we hope and expect by mid-February—we will look at the next roll-out phase.

My hon. Friend will know that there are many categories of profession, including those who work in refuge charities but also police officers, teachers and others, where great arguments will be made as to their exposure to the public and the risk of infection. I very much take her urging on board, and we will, I am sure, in due course consider her points and others in this regard.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD) [V]: As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the prevention of adverse childhood experiences, I am incredibly worried about the long-term consequences of covid and the increase in domestic abuse for a large number of children. There will be no short-term fixes. Will the Minister work with the APPG to embed widespread trauma-informed services across the country?

Victoria Atkins: Yes, I most certainly will. Again, I refer to the contribution made by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), who is already preparing work on the effects of adverse experiences in the early years of a child’s life. Our understanding is improving as to, for example, the effect that living in an abusive household can have on a child’s life chances.

In my work on tackling serious violence, we are very clear about the theme of violence in the home being very common for those who commit violence outside the home. There are many reasons why this work is invaluable, and I look forward to working with the hon. Lady and the APPG on this.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con) [V]: My hon. Friend will be aware that organisations such as the Safeguarding Alliance have reported that there is a new frontier of vulnerable children exposed to county lines drug gangs, online harms and domestic abuse, and the BBC found that reports of online child abuse images increased by 50% during the last lockdown. Furthermore, many children on the fringes of care are often not attending school during this lockdown, even if permitted to do so.

Will my hon. Friend ensure that these children are identified by schools and checked by social services? Will she set out what measures the Government are taking to ensure that we do not have a safeguarding crisis in the offing for these young children? Finally, will she meet the Safeguarding Alliance to discuss these issues?

Victoria Atkins: Yes. I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend for all the work he does on the Education Committee to scrutinise our work. We are all concerned about the welfare of the most vulnerable children. That is why, for example, in the first lockdown we enabled vulnerable children to still attend school, sending out the message to parents, carers and children and young people themselves that if they need that extra bit of help and support, schools are open to give them access to that. That continues under today’s restrictions, because schools are open to vulnerable children.

In terms of the work that we are doing over and above keeping schools open, I have already referred to the vital work that social workers are conducting and our efforts to increase the number of social workers available to help with that work. Some of our children’s charities have also been fantastic. I have seen for myself the work that Barnardo’s and the Children’s Society are doing to help children, particularly those who are potentially being ensnared by county lines gangs. This comes back to how we can reach these poor, poor children before those gangs really get their fists on them. It is about a combination of education at school, education and support for families—because mums, dads and carers can be very worried about their child—and ensuring that we have robust law enforcement measures in place against those gangs. One thing the police were able to do during the last national lockdown—the first one—was concentrate on targeting drug gangs. We are seeing some of the results of that work, alongside the safeguarding and early intervention work we are doing.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab) [V]: I thank the Minister for her update and fully welcome the new Ask for ANI scheme. Residents in Pontypridd who have experienced domestic abuse will appreciate the issue being raised here today. As my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) has said, tackling the root cause of domestic abuse requires a long-term strategy focused on interventions targeted towards the perpetrators. Will the Minister therefore confirm exactly what support the Home Office is providing and what conversations it is having with organisations working in this area?

Victoria Atkins: I am so pleased the hon. Lady raised the point about a strategy. She will know, I hope, that alongside our work on the Domestic Abuse Bill—she served on the Bill Committee—which is currently in the House of Lords, we are planning for a stand-alone, specific national strategy on domestic abuse. I very much expect there to be measures in relation to perpetrators within that, because although we of course want to support victims, it is vital that we tackle the cycle of abuse as well. That strategy, combined with our investment of £7.1 million in perpetrator programmes, will, I hope, revolutionise our approach in this important regard of tackling domestic abuse.

Fay Jones (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con) [V]: Last year, the Government prioritised the Domestic Abuse Bill Committee so that the Bill's progress was not disrupted by the pandemic. That speaks to both the determination of the Government and the personal determination of this safeguarding Minister, and the Ask for ANI scheme is evidence of that. The scourge of cyber-flashing, whereby unwanted and unsolicited indecent photographs are distributed to mobile devices, needs to be made a criminal offence. Will she confirm that the Government are considering that?

Victoria Atkins: It was a pleasure to serve on the Bill Committee with my hon. Friend, and I know her personal commitment to helping her constituents in this regard. I am pleased that she has brought up that aspect, because it enables me to reiterate to hon. Members that we are running a call for evidence at the moment on producing a new violence against women and girls strategy. I do not want to pre-guess what the public, victims, survivors and charities may say in the course of that call for evidence, but I, for one, am very aware of the offence of which she speaks. I very much want those sorts of 21st century online crimes to be dealt with not just in the VAWG strategy, but in the DA strategy and by making sure our laws are up to date—we have asked the Law Commission to ensure that. I thank her for her question and encourage her to publicise the call for evidence with her constituents.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP) [V]: I thank the Minister for her statement. The Prime Minister indicated to the Liaison Committee yesterday that the Government do not have any specific policies in place for survivors of domestic abuse among what the Home Office describes as those with “insecure immigration status”. Will the Minister confirm whether that is the case? Will she look at additional protections for those seeking refuge in the United Kingdom?

Victoria Atkins: I can help the hon. Gentleman with news of a specific pilot project, for which we launched the bidding process just before Christmas, to help support migrant victims of domestic abuse. He will know that there is already support available for some migrant victims, namely those who have a legitimate expectation of indefinite leave to remain because they come to this country on a spousal visa and they are eligible under the domestic violence concession scheme. We are very conscious that there is a cohort of victims who do not fall within those criteria, so this pilot scheme has been created very much in consultation with specialist charities that help such victims. We are in the middle of the bid process, and I am very much hoping we will be able to make some progress in the next couple of months so that we can help those victims first and foremost as victims of domestic abuse, and ensure that their abusers cannot continue their abuse.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con) [V]: Can I ask my hon. Friend what specific measures she is taking to reach out to domestic abuse victims in the BAME community who might find it harder to communicate and let others know of the plight they face?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my right hon. Friend sincerely. Yes, we know that the plight of victims in the BAME community and those of others in similar situations

means they may find it very difficult to reach out. The Home Office works very closely with specialist charitable organisations—I myself have the pleasure of working with them as well—to make sure that the policies we are introducing will help with the whole realm of problems, issues and abuse that victims face. I very much thank my right hon. Friend for her help in ensuring that the Women and Equalities Committee scrutinises our work.

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab) [V]: Running away from home, wanting a divorce, wanting to marry and saying no to marriage are some of the scenarios that victims of abuse have contacted the charity Karma Nirvana about since the lockdown. Lockdowns and this crisis have produced the economic conditions to increase forced marriage, no doubt among families already struggling with food and financial hardship in particular. Will the Minister work with her counterparts leading in the Department for Education and the Department for Work and Pensions to deliver a plan to tackle forced marriages in lockdown that provides sufficient economic protection to households so that they are not choosing between their children marrying or going hungry?

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Lady sets out one of the most heinous forms of hidden harms. I hope she knows of the work we have done to tackle forced marriage both before and during the pandemic. Certainly, I always enjoy working with Karma Nirvana on this. I am conscious of time, so if I may, I will write to her with the specific steps we are taking to help victims of forced marriage.

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con) [V]: I thank the Minister for her statement and for all her work in this area. The Minister referred earlier to the helpline element of Operation Encompass. There is another part of this initiative whereby the police automatically inform schools when a domestic violence incident has occurred in a child's home. This has been, tragically, absolutely vital in my constituency, and I think it should be available nationwide. Will the Minister confirm whether the police element of Operation Encompass will be available on a nationwide basis?

Victoria Atkins: I am delighted to be able to confirm that not only is my hon. Friend's force, Kent, signed up to that fantastic scheme, but so too are 40 other forces out of the 43 police forces in England and Wales. This is a great scheme. I would encourage the remaining forces to sign up, because we have seen the evidence that helping children on the morning of their return to school after a terrible incident at home the night before can pay dividends for their wellbeing.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab) [V]: I welcome today's announcement of the Ask for ANI scheme. The Minister will be aware that legal aid is a vital service for victims of domestic abuse. To access this service, victims quite often need a letter from a GP to prove that their injuries are a result of abuse. There are reports of GPs charging up to £150 for a letter to do this, which is a disgrace, so will the Government today commit to ensuring that this appalling practice ends?

Victoria Atkins: On the practice the hon. Member describes, we have already, in years gone by, agreed with the British Medical Association that this is not within

[Victoria Atkins]

its recommendations, and it has made that clear to its members. I know this has been raised in the other House, and we continue to look into it.

If I may, I will just clarify a tiny point. My right hon. Friend the Leader of the House answered a question on this earlier and referred to considerations within the Domestic Abuse Bill, which of course is in the other place. Just to clarify—there was a problem of translation through masks—we look at legal aid in context and it is always something we consider, but within the Bill itself we are looking very specifically at the measures available in courts to help victims of domestic abuse.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con) [V]: This is a very welcome statement and initiative. The Minister has referred to the priority that is rightly being given by the police and the criminal courts to bringing perpetrators before them swiftly and promptly where there is evidence to support doing so, but will she also set out what steps the Government are taking to ensure that victims have as swift access to legal advice as to—[Inaudible]—redress in the family and civil courts without the need to go through complicated legal aid application forms?

Victoria Atkins: I hope I caught most of my hon. Friend's question. He will know of the sterling work being done by my ministerial counterpart the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), to ensure that victims of domestic abuse can have access to free legal advice in the initial stages of their case. The scheme is called Finding Legal Options for Women Survivors. I would really recommend it, because it has a huge benefit for people who are in the early stages of the court process. Of course, courts remain open during these restrictions. They have remained open for domestic abuse cases, and for other vulnerabilities and priority cases. We encourage anyone who needs to access a court to please, please continue trying to do so during the current set of restrictions.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill) was very brief in his question, but I must beg that we go a lot faster now, otherwise not everybody will get to ask their question. It is also not fair on people who are waiting to take part in the next three items of business, so questions and answers have to be short.

Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab) [V]: We know the terrifying impact of lockdowns on those experiencing domestic abuse, and the increased pressure on support services and refuges. What discussions has the Minister had with charities and organisations running refuges for women, men and those of the LGBT+ community about capacity, and what plans are there to ensure that a rise in demand does not mean that some people are left with a choice between staying with their abuser and homelessness?

Victoria Atkins: As I said earlier, I am in constant contact, as are my officials, with people who work in the domestic abuse sector and provide refuges. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has provided advance funding ahead of the duty under the

Domestic Abuse Bill coming into force—we hope, in April or May. We very much want to keep building this capability so that people have access to the services that the hon. Member set out.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD) [V]: Research by Women's Aid has found that covid-19 restrictions and associated socioeconomic strains make leaving abusive relationships more difficult. Its data also indicates that separations are being delayed until digital restrictions are eased, rather than cancelled. Although the funding and support announced today is welcome, given that separation is a known trigger for domestic abuse escalation, what are the Government planning to put in place to anticipate this likely surge in demand?

Victoria Atkins: We have been working closely with domestic abuse charities throughout the pandemic to ensure that when a surge happens—as is sadly predicted—the services are there to be able to deal with it. That is why we have committed the extra funding that I outlined earlier in the statement. We are very much looking to the future through the Domestic Abuse Bill and the continued duty on tier 1 local authorities to help people into safe accommodation.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con) [V]: I congratulate my hon. Friend on her announcement today. It is yet another positive step from this Government on tackling domestic abuse. She is aware that victims of this heinous crime require the help and support of many organisations, just like Family Help in Darlington. Will my hon. Friend outline to the House how the Government are getting their financial support to such organisations as quickly as possible?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend, who was a sterling performer in the Bill Committee. We have taken a national, regional and local approach to community-based services and we have rolled out funding for that with the help of police and crime commissioners to commissioned and non-commissioned services. Of course, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has been rolling out money to refuges. We in the Home Office have focused on the national and regional parts of the funding, including support to bolster the helplines, which so many people rely on when seeking help.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her statement. There were 557 domestic abuse calls in the last week of March last year and 8,302 from April to June. Will she confirm that the support and help that have been announced today will also be implemented in Northern Ireland and that discussion has taken place with the Minister in charge in the Northern Ireland Assembly to ensure that that is the case?

Victoria Atkins: I am delighted to say that my opposite number in the Northern Ireland Executive is working hard and has confirmed her intention to bring in similar legislation in Northern Ireland. That is a vital part of our jigsaw in ratifying the Istanbul convention, so we wish her and the Assembly well in their scrutiny of the forthcoming legislation.

Jane Stevenson (Wolverhampton North East) (Con) [V]: To those trapped in abusive relationships, getting out can seem like an impossible task. Will my hon. Friend reassure us that, if they seek help to Ask for ANI, they

will be connected to an amazing network of help such as The Haven in Wolverhampton? She also mentioned modern slavery and human trafficking. Can victims of those hidden harms also seek emergency help through the Ask for ANI pharmacy scheme?

Victoria Atkins: The Ask for ANI scheme is focused at the moment on victims of domestic abuse. There has been a huge and careful training programme of the pharmacists who are currently participating. Nearly 8,000 members of staff have been trained in Boots alone. They will be very knowledgeable about what to do when somebody walks into their chemist's seeking help.

My hon. Friend is right that sometimes just getting out of the house is a huge obstacle. That is why I am delighted that we are also funding a rail to refuge scheme to help victims make that railway journey to a refuge as and when they need it.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Sadly, 1,500 children in York are growing up in a home where domestic abuse is a factor, according to the office of the Children's Commissioner. Will the Minister give clear assurances today that victims can have the confidence that, if they Ask for ANI, they will be provided with more than a conversation, but with safeguarded housing, and wellbeing and psychological help for them and their children?

Victoria Atkins: I hope that the hon. Lady knows that the training of members of staff has been meticulous. We have created the scheme hand in glove with domestic abuse charities because we are so concerned to ensure the safety of victims. I see it as the first avenue of support. Once the victim is in the consultation room, she or he can set out what they would like to happen. For some it will be a 999 call, for others it will be access to community services, but I hope that the hon. Lady has a picture now of the tapestry of support that we are rolling out locally to try to help victims of domestic abuse.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con) [V]: Online image-based sexual abuse is a growing way in which perpetrators coerce and control their victims by threatening to release private and intimate videos and photographs online. According to the revenge porn helpline, the number of people contacting it has risen to more than 3,000—a 22% increase in 2020. Has the Minister considered the impact of that during lockdown? Will she agree to include the threat of releasing those intimate and private images as a crime in the Domestic Abuse Bill?

Victoria Atkins: My hon. Friend is right that that can be a devastating form of abuse for victims of domestic abuse. We are very much listening to debates in the other place about the terrible factors in that type of behaviour. I hope she knows that we have already asked the Law Commission to look into the many forms of malicious behaviour that can occur online. I know that the Law Commission is considering that and we are very much looking forward to receiving the outcome of that review to see what may be needed in future.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): We know that when it comes to domestic abuse, every contact counts. The Government's new Ask for ANI scheme is a very welcome step towards enabling victims of domestic abuse to

receive the support they need, but we need to do more. Will the Minister look again at including a statutory duty on public authorities to train frontline staff to recognise the signs of domestic abuse and to fund such training?

Victoria Atkins: I hope the hon. Lady has seen not just the announcement of the codeword scheme today but the announcement encouraging employers to join the cause and to be better informed as to how they can help members of their workforce who may be suffering from domestic abuse. The Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), has written to many, many businesses today to set out how they can help. I see this as very much part of our overall efforts to ensure that people understand what domestic abuse is, the many forms it can take, and how it is everyone's business.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): We have considerably exceeded the time allocated for this statement, but I do not think it would be fair to cut off the last three people who are on the list. However, I say now—not only to people who have taken part in this statement but to all Members, if anyone is paying attention—that if we are going to make virtual proceedings work, we have to do it as if we were in the Chamber, and that means that we do it quickly. It is not a conversation; it is questions and answers. Now we really have to go quickly. I say the same for the next statement, because it is not fair for the people who will be here at 5 o'clock and simply will not get to speak.

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con) [V]: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Due to the emergency circumstances, victims of domestic abuse sometimes have to flee, leaving behind all their possessions, including mobile phones, making it harder to stay in contact with the police and other agencies. In Stoke-on-Trent, the police have launched a fantastic initiative whereby some vulnerable residents and domestic abuse victims have been given mobile phones loaded with useful contacts based on the individual's situation. Does the Minister agree that it is important to support measures enabling domestic abuse victims to leave their home environment while eradicating the fear of being cut off from society, especially when covid-19 is exacerbating isolation across the board?

Victoria Atkins: We are keen not just to help victims to flee home when that is necessary for their own safety but, importantly, to keep them in their own homes where it is safe to do so, and to ask, or demand, that the perpetrator leaves. There is a whole host of work going on on this. Perhaps I can take the opportunity to discuss it with my hon. Friend in slower time outside of this statement, but I thank her for raising it.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab) [V]: Many of us have been extremely concerned about the increased incidence of domestic abuse and other hidden harms during lockdown. However, many domestic abuse charities and anti-modern slavery and vulnerable children's organisations have been struggling financially and have spoken about the insufficient support from Government. Can the Minister confirm what discussions she has had with the Treasury and the sector on multi-year funding?

Victoria Atkins: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answers I have given previously, including in relation to the £25 million to £26 million that has already been paid out to charities.

Julie Marson (Hertford and Stortford) (Con) [V]: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for getting to me at the end of the list.

I thank the Minister for her statement and all her work on this issue. I commend to her the work of Future Living Hertford, which does amazing work with victims of domestic abuse and their families and is running a “children’s voices” campaign to highlight the need to hear children and recognise their status as victims. Does she agree that this message is particularly important during this crisis and is completely in line with the aims of the Domestic Abuse Bill? Will she agree to visit Future Living Hertford with me when such visits are possible once more?

Victoria Atkins: I would be delighted to do so. I thank my hon. Friend for her work on the Bill Committee enabling us to table an amendment whereby children are included in the Bill, reflecting the impact that this abuse has on them.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): In order to make the necessary arrangements for the next business, I am going to suspend the House for only two minutes in order to save time.

1.54 pm

Sitting suspended.

Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Aid Beneficiaries

SELECT COMMITTEE ON INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Select Committee statement

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): We now come to the Select Committee statement. Sarah Champion will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of her statement, I will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement, and I will call Sarah Champion to respond to those in turn. I call the Chair of the International Development Committee, Sarah Champion.

1.57 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab) [V]: I speak to the report issued this morning by the International Development Committee titled “Progress on tackling the sexual exploitation and abuse of aid beneficiaries”. I thank the Chair and members of the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time in the Chamber for this statement, and the sponsors and contributors to this afternoon’s debates for their understanding.

We launched our inquiry in July 2020, and we are very grateful to everyone who provided evidence to inform our work. I would particularly like to thank our specialist advisers and the wonderful Committee staff, who have provided invaluable support throughout—plus, of course, my fellow MPs on the Committee.

Sexual exploitation and abuse of beneficiaries is still happening, and it is happening with impunity. In February 2018, the aid sector was rocked by revelations that aid workers had been paying local vulnerable women for sex in Haiti while they were meant to be working on the humanitarian response to the 2010 earthquake. During the investigations that followed, it became clear that organisations involved put limiting reputational damage ahead of fulfilling the duty to report and challenge abuse.

That case did not occur in a vacuum; our inquiry shows that sexual exploitation and abuse is endemic in the aid sector. Twenty-six per cent. of respondents to the Committee’s online survey claimed to have witnessed sexual exploitation and abuse of aid recipients. That disgusts me, but it does not come as a surprise. Abuse can happen whenever there is a power imbalance. Extreme power imbalances are almost always at the heart of humanitarian responses. Local populations are totally reliant on aid workers for their most basic needs, and perpetrators know the power that affords them.

Aid organisations should be alert to the obvious risk that they will be targeted by individuals intent on abusing vulnerable people, but all too often there is a lack of concerted action to face up to this reality. Aid organisations therefore become complicit in enabling sexual exploitation and abuse to occur.

I am proud that in the wake of the Haiti scandal, the Department for International Development was at the forefront of efforts to tackle abuse. International safeguarding summits were arranged, commitments were signed and working groups were convened. Numerous

organisations in receipt of UK aid funding have taken steps showing their commitment to tackling sexual abuse. Many hired preventing abuse co-ordinators, while others introduced new training for staff. Recently, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office published a strategy on safeguarding against sexual exploitation and abuse in the aid sector.

Clearly, there is not a lack of policies and procedures in place, yet abuse is still happening, and the UK Government continue to fund organisations at the centre of sexual abuse scandals. Some 73% of people who responded to our survey think that sexual exploitation and abuse of aid beneficiaries is still a problem. The Committee agrees. Abuse within the aid sector is rife, and until we accept this, we will not resolve it. Alina Potts from the Empowered Aid project gave evidence to our inquiry about its work looking at how survival equipment is distributed to refugees in Uganda and Lebanon. It found that sexual exploitation and abuse by aid and non-aid actors is pervasive across all points of distribution. Alina told us that, of the many women who reported sexual abuse, the majority were abused to access aid that they were unknowingly already entitled to. This behaviour must be robustly challenged, yet a third of respondents to our survey thought their organisations had made little or no progress on ensuring that aid recipients know their rights, including how to report cases of exploitation and abuse. My Committee strongly recommends that all aid agencies make a point of telling recipients their rights and entitlements and how to complain.

Last September, we learned of the scale of the sexual abuse of aid beneficiaries during the 2018-20 Ebola response in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The Committee heard that sex-for-jobs schemes were an open secret among aid workers. Local women who sought employment with aid organisations were subjected to horrendous sexual abuse by men with the power to decide whether to hire them. The level of impunity was astounding. Abuse victims were ferried to and from hotels where aid workers stayed in vehicles carrying World Health Organisation insignia. One woman described how she had been told by a foreign WHO worker—through an interpreter—that she would have to sleep with him in order to get a job. The UK is the biggest donor to the WHO. The Government must show zero tolerance and hold organisations, including multilateral organisations, to account for their safeguarding failings.

Giving evidence in October, the Charity Commission warned about sexual exploitation and abuse taking place in Myanmar. While I was pleased to hear that these issues are being identified and efforts are being taken to tackle them, the Committee is clear that abuse should not be treated like some repulsive game of whack-a-mole, chasing problems from country to country. By their very nature, aid beneficiaries are some of the most vulnerable people on the planet, and therefore the potential for sexual abuse and exploitation should always be a concern. It can be prevented by embedding safeguarding in every project.

I am fed up with hearing that lessons have been learned. We will only see true change when there is a root-and-branch transformation of the culture of aid organisations. The Committee heard appalling accounts of this culture, with accusations of racist, colonial and sexist attitudes fed by unchallenged power imbalances.

This discrimination enables abuse to flourish. Just 8% of respondents to our survey believe the culture of this sector is as strong as it can be to prevent exploitation and abuse. Sexual abusers are almost always men, and their victims almost always women. Some 80% of WHO workers in the DRC Ebola response were men. The Committee heard that there are repeated calls from aid recipients for more female aid workers, but we are yet to see any real moves by the sector to address this. Is it any wonder that most beneficiaries never formally report abuse? How can anyone have confidence that they will be listened to and believed and that a robust investigation will be undertaken in such circumstances?

Only 16% responding to our survey felt that their organisation had in place safe reporting and complaints mechanisms. Even when abuses are reported, aid organisations hide behind weak justice systems in the country where the abuse occurred, or the difficulty of penalising local contractors, to avoid taking proper investigations. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office could do more to combat this. Our embassies already liaise with local enforcement. Why not use them when a British citizen is the perpetrator, and help survivors to access support? The Sexual Offences Act 2003 provides existing legislation to prevent sex tourism, but it is rarely used. It could be a powerful tool to prosecute aid abusers. The forthcoming Domestic Abuse Bill could do the same. Criminal convictions are a strong deterrent. Victims and survivors of UN staff face even greater hurdles, with agencies wrongly invoking UN immunity to protect perpetrators from robust investigations.

The Government have invested heavily in schemes to prevent perpetrators from moving from one job to another, but first we need to identify the perpetrators, and no evidence we received made us believe that reporting and investigations were working as they should be. If the sector is serious about preventing abuse, the solution is simple: empower local communities, especially women's groups, to have a greater say in the design and delivery of aid, and embed safeguarding from the start. FCDO-funded organisations must be required to report cases of abuse to it, and any associated non-disclosure agreements. There must be consequences of failings that lead to cases of abuse. Failings would include poor treatment of whistleblowers. Our survey found that 57% of those who had tested their whistleblowing policies felt that they were inadequate. Whistleblowers must play a key role in exposing abuse as they force action to happen. They must be protected. Bizarrely, the Government have not designated aid workers as a regulated activity eligible for Disclosure and Barring Service checks, which means that aid organisations cannot apply. This should be changed today.

I conclude by saying to the sector: I know that the vast majority of aid workers are good people giving their all to make a difference, but you have to wake up to the fact that some of your staff are sexual predators. You have to change your organisational culture to address this, and embed safeguarding in everything you do. I commend my Committee's report and this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Chair of the Select Committee. We will now take brief questions to the Chair of the Committee, starting with David Mundell.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con) [V]: Although the report does not make for comfortable reading, I welcome it and the efforts of the Committee to ensure best practice within the aid sector. Does the hon. Lady agree that it is imperative that the UK Government now embed safeguarding in all their development work and that they sanction aid organisations, including multilateral organisations, that fail to do so?

Sarah Champion: I completely agree with the right hon. Gentleman. Unless that happens, the abuse will continue. It is the Government's duty to do that. They are spending taxpayers' money, and they need to be accountable for that.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab) [V]: This report from the International Development Committee is very important, and I would like to pay tribute to all the staff who have served the Committee and send my best wishes to Fergus Reid, the principal Clerk to the Committee, who is taking some time off. After a lot of fanfare, the Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative is a skeleton of its former self. Does my hon. Friend agree that, without the political will from the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, the ability of the initiative to have a positive impact will continue to dwindle?

Sarah Champion: I thank my hon. Friend and fellow Committee member, and I completely agree. We need to see the broader perspective on this, and unless we deal with and prevent violence against women and girls in all its forms, these examples of where it pops up—whether it is violence in war or violence towards aid workers—will just keep on happening. The Government have great strategies in place for this, but they need to embed them in all their work.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con) [V]: Since concluding our inquiry, the scale of the reductions to UK aid have become much clearer. Does the Committee Chairman agree that the Government must ensure that cuts do not lead to aid delivery partners and contractors reducing operational standards and leaving women and girls at increased risk? How can the Government ensure that their tenders for aid projects, and bids in reply, require effective provision for spending on safeguarding?

Sarah Champion: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and for his work on the Committee. At the moment only 0.3% of Government funding goes specifically to women and girls' projects, so I share his concern that with a third now taken away from the aid budget they will be the ones really let down by this system. I urge the Government to stop that. They have to embed safeguarding in every aspect of their work and make sure they fund aid organisations to do the same. This is not a bolt-on. This is not additional. Safeguarding the most vulnerable people on the planet must be funded and must be core to everyone's work.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD) [V]: I thank the Select Committee for this very important report. Is it not the case that organisations that receive Government grants should have robust procedures in place, including complaints

procedures, so the Government can monitor and approve? Should those procedures not be required by the Government before any organisation receives any funding?

Sarah Champion: I completely agree. It is one of our recommendations that not only do the Government audit and ensure safeguarding policies are in place, but that they are acted on. When the Government feel there are shortcomings, there should be sanctions, including financial sanctions.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con) [V]: As always, it is an honour to speak to my fellow Rotherham MP. I welcome the Select Committee's work on tackling the sexual exploitation and abuse of aid beneficiaries, but inevitably there will be a power and wealth imbalance in the sector. We must never accept that that inevitability will lead to exploitation. Does the hon. Lady agree that we must do more through our safeguarding standards and that we must act quickly?

Sarah Champion: I thank my honourable neighbour. I agree. The best way to stop abuse and achieve value for money on aid projects is to involve local people in delivery and safeguarding, and in the building of and reporting on such projects. They know what they need best and we should be there to serve them.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab) [V]: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for all the many years of work she has done on these important issues. Does she agree that Ministers must urgently set out what steps they are taking to work with local populations to dismantle imbalanced power dynamics, and what actions they are taking to ensure aid organisations do the same?

Sarah Champion: I agree with my hon. Friend. What we need to see now is the Minister step up and outline how the Government are going to address the imbalance between recipients and aid workers which many seek to exploit, how we ensure all projects that receive UK funding are properly audited on their delivery and outcomes, and how they are looking actively to empower local communities so they can all reach their potential.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con) [V]: I thank the hon. Lady for her statement. My belief, having been involved since 2018, is that it is no good having tick-boxes for organisations when it is well known that it is endemic in the sector. It is also no good putting up notices in refugee camps in different places, because many of the women and girls cannot read. How are they going to report the situation anyway? Does she agree that now, having done this latest report, which is still pretty damning, the FCDO needs to cut off the funding for organisations—whoever they are, whether it is the WHO, Oxfam, Save the Children or whoever—and publicise what they are doing and why, so it gets out that nobody is above the law?

Sarah Champion: May I take this moment, Madam Deputy Speaker, to pay tribute to the hon. Lady who is a member of the Committee? She fought to get the first two reports into sexual abuse in the aid sector off the ground and continues to fight for women's rights around the world. I completely agree with her. The Government need to show zero tolerance. The most effective way to do that is by taking away the

cash. There can be no safe space for sexual abuse within the aid sector and no taxpayers' money spent on supporting it.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Chair and the Select Committee for all they have done on a very difficult and emotive topic. The Committee has made a number of suggestions for changes to end the cycle of abuse. Can the Chair confirm that the goal of prosecuting sexual offenders overseas is achievable and will be available as redress to non-governmental organisations in every form, not just those funded or part-funded by Government?

Sarah Champion: Abusers are getting off the hook because aid organisations have put prosecuting them into the “too difficult” box, either because it happened overseas, or because it involved locally employed subcontractors. It is not too difficult, and we owe it to the survivors to do that. We can use the existing sex tourism Act, and we can work to support local justice systems to ensure that prosecutions take place. The Committee heard that sexual abusers are actively trying to get into the aid sector because they know that they can get away with the abuse there. We have to stamp it out.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP) [V]: I thank the Chair and the Committee for an extremely important report on this difficult and poignant area. Some of the individuals most vulnerable to sexual exploitation are people with disabilities. Will the Chair comment on what more can be done to ensure that people with disabilities in the aid sector have the support they need to know their rights, communicate their experiences, and navigate any criminal justice system?

Sarah Champion: The hon. Member is absolutely right. The inquiry found that there is so much discrimination, and the power imbalances that exist are not being challenged by the aid organisations. We found that there was very little effort to engage local populations in developing programmes or safeguarding routes. Methods to enable beneficiaries to report abuse tended to be in written form, or someone would telephone in. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, one organisation had 22 different reporting mechanisms, and not one of

them got used. Unless we build things in partnership with local people, and ask them what is the best way forward, whatever clever systems we put in place will not engage the local population and they will fail. We need aid organisations to be much more proactive about engaging with everybody who they are meant to be serving.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: The covid-19 pandemic and measures taken to contain it have exacerbated gender inequality around the world, creating yet greater power imbalances and raising the risk of abuse and exploitation. DFID's strategic vision for gender equality 2030 provided a strong framework to ensure that the rights of women and girls, and gender equality, continue to be prioritised in development and humanitarian responses. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office must formally adopt that framework? What assessment has her Committee made of the impact of the upcoming cuts to the aid budget on the ability of safeguarding to be at the heart of our official development assistance programmes?

Sarah Champion: I thank my hon. Friend for her powerful question, which gets to the nub of this issue. I have no idea why the FCDO has not formally adopted the gender strategy that DFID put in place in 2018. I am grateful that it has put a safeguarding strategy in place, but my fear is that unless it also puts money in, and expects aid organisations to embed safeguarding in their projects, that will fail. It has been estimated that, because of the pandemic, 30 million girls are being forced into child marriages, and my concern is that—this issue was touched on in the previous statement—women and children who are locked in homes because of covid are bearing the brunt of this. That will be happening around the world.

Our second report comes out at the end of the month and tries to deal with the secondary impacts of covid. Women and girls bear the brunt of that, and the Government must proactively put the money where the intent is, sign the document, and ensure that gender equality is embedded across all FCDO and Government projects.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Lady for responding to those questions and presenting her report.

Backbench Business

Long Covid

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am sure all colleagues will have noticed that we have a relatively short amount of time for two debates this afternoon. This one will run for approximately one hour and 20 minutes, to divide the time equally, and there is a three-minute limit on Back-Bench contributions. I am sorry about that, but time is very pressured.

2.19 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD) [V]: I beg to move,

That this House has considered long covid.

I would like to start by thanking the Backbench Business Committee for giving us time to debate long covid today. I also thank members of the all-party parliamentary group on coronavirus, especially the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) and my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), who co-sponsored the debate. Most of all, I want to thank everyone who has written to me, the all-party group or their own MP in the last few weeks with their stories. Their accounts are deeply moving. Today's debate is for them.

In one such email, a constituent of mine said,

"I can't see myself getting better and being able to beat this fatigue."

Her experience is sadly not unique. Other symptoms of long covid include, but are not limited to, poor memory, brain fog, headaches, lung pain, palpitations, muscle pains, purple toes, hallucinations, hair loss and insomnia. These symptoms often start weeks or even months after the initial bout of covid, and many report them getting worse, not better, with time.

Long covid affects young as well as old, and the numbers are staggering. It is believed that there are 300,000 people living with long covid already in the UK and 7 million worldwide. New research in *The Lancet* suggests that more than half of people who are hospitalised experience ongoing symptoms six months later, and the Office for National Statistics estimates that one in 10 people who contract covid at all will still have symptoms three months later. So far this year, we have consistently seen more than 40,000 new coronavirus cases a day, which means that there are potentially more than 4,000 new long covid cases a day—I repeat: 4,000 more cases a day.

Despite those numbers, public awareness of long covid is poor. Many who are young and fit think that they have nothing to worry about and that the restrictions are more about protecting others than themselves. One expert told our group this week that anyone who flouts rules by thinking it will not affect them is also playing Russian roulette with their health. We are concerned that the Government's focus on NHS beds as the primary metric by which danger is measured means that the public believe that if they do not end up in hospital, it counts as a mild case of coronavirus. The problem is that a mild case of coronavirus can lead to long covid—and there is nothing mild about long covid.

Take Jason, for example. He is 23 years old and a personal trainer, so his is not the profile of someone we often see blighted by coronavirus in the news. He told me:

"for the last nine months I haven't been able to leave my house due to long effects of covid. I haven't cooked all my meals for one whole day once since the end of February, everything small is a major task. I can't walk more than 100 metres without suffering."

The evidence of children getting long covid is building. New groups such as Long Covid Kids have been highlighting how children can present very differently from adults. That needs robust research fast, as there are surely implications for how we view school safety.

The consequences of this emerging reality should give us in this place pause for thought. Some are arguing for a rapid unlocking when the first wave of vaccination is complete, and yet the effect that such a move would have on the numbers contracting long covid seems to be missing from the debate. Long covid is scary and often heartbreaking, and it is avoidable if we prioritise keeping numbers low.

Today, the all-party group is calling for three things: better reporting, urgent money for research, and recognition by employers and the welfare system. On reporting, we need a national register to count and publish the number of people living with long covid in the UK. Positive cases, hospital admissions and deaths due to covid-19 are published regularly. We need to add long covid to that list. Doing that would help to drive up compliance, especially among younger adults. It would also help to explain policy decisions about future rules and restrictions, especially once the most vulnerable have been vaccinated.

Many long covid sufferers have no formal diagnosis, as they never had a test because tests were not available in the first wave. It is also worth noting that long covid can emerge months after a bout of the initial virus and long after the antibodies remain, so even an antibody test may not tell the whole story. The register therefore needs to be symptom-based, not test-based. We also need active follow-up of people who test positive for coronavirus, to identify long covid cases better and offer support.

The Government need to improve urgently the scope and funding of research both into the disease itself, including its prevalence among different sexes, races and groups and diagnosis, and of course into effective therapies. Clinicians have called for the approach to be truly multidisciplinary. It should cover mental as well as physical health. There are currently 69 NHS England long covid centres, which is a good start; however, it is a postcode lottery. We have heard, for example, that there are none in Wales. Some have reported being turned away when they go, or even told that they are not treatable. Long covid's impact on mental health needs further research and support too. That includes children. Although we welcome the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines, we also need to remember that there is a lot that we still do not know, and the guidelines need to evolve rapidly to reflect the most recent research.

Long covid sufferers feel they are forgotten in this pandemic, and their plight needs recognition by both the state and employers. Take Liz. She told me:

"I lost my job as a result of my illness, I have struggled on universal credit. This does not cover my bills. I'm getting further and further into debt and can't see a way out."

Take Alexander, a headteacher, who said:

"after 23 years of service as a teacher and headteacher, I now have a written warning on my employment record due to me becoming ill during a global pandemic. I have a second review meeting in just over a week's time and having not made sufficient recovery to return to work, I will most probably receive a final written warning."

Take Daisy, an NHS nurse in Wales. For four months she received reduced and then no pay from NHS Cymru, which told her that it was unable to support staff who contracted covid-19. Her case was resolved, but she continues to say that this issue has not been resolved at a national level in Wales. That story, and many others like it, have left me speechless—a headteacher and a nurse, key workers on the frontline, who have no choice but to do their job with inadequate personal protective equipment and testing, and now face financial ruin for doing their duty. It is unacceptable, which is why the APPG recommends that the UK Government recognise long covid as an occupational disease and institute a long covid compensation scheme for frontline workers.

That scheme should go beyond existing sick pay schemes and should be specific to those living with long covid who are unable to work. During the first wave, I led a cross-party group of MPs in calling on the Prime Minister to set up a coronavirus compensation scheme for the families of frontline workers who tragically died in the line of duty. The Government listened and now there is a scheme in place, albeit just for NHS and social care staff. We need an extension of such a scheme so that it mirrors the armed forces compensation scheme, and recognises that casualties are not counted just by the tragedy of death.

What of everyone else? Guidelines from the Government for employers are crucial, so that the public and private sectors know how they should be supporting people with long covid. I first wrote to the Prime Minister recommending employer guidelines in August. Four months later, we have not seen any progress. Last but not least, when all else fails we need to ensure that our welfare system is not unfairly excluding people with long covid. Statutory sick pay, personal independence payment and universal credit all need to be geared up to support them and, indeed, their families, who suddenly find themselves as their carers.

There are so many unanswered questions and concerns, and, as you pointed out, Madam Deputy Speaker, there is not enough time. Our understanding of covid, and long covid in particular, is evolving day by day, and I have no doubt that this will not be the last debate we have on this matter.

Reporting, research and recognition are all desperately needed, but more than anything else we need to protect our heroes on the frontline who cannot work because they have long covid. I urge the Government to commit to recognising long covid as an occupational disease and to create a scheme to help those people; that is my most urgent and immediate ask of the Minister in today's debate.

I end by thanking all Members for speaking today, and, above all, by thanking everyone who has shared their story. I want them to know that they have not been forgotten and that this House has heard them and it is listening. Our hope now is that the Government will step up and act, too.

2.30 pm

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con) [V]: I draw the House's attention to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as a practising NHS doctor who has been working on the frontline throughout the covid pandemic.

There is no doubt that long covid has a life-changing impact on the lives of some of the people whom it affects. We often do not hear much about young people when we discuss the impact of covid on our hospitals and when we talk about death rates, because, predominantly, the illness seems to have immediate adverse physical outcomes for older people. Very often, though, it is young people who are the victims of the life-changing impacts of long covid. As the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) outlined, it is a subject that we are learning more about literally by the day, and we still need to better evaluate the data and the statistics on long covid. Undoubtedly, we are seeing a group of individuals who are experiencing the effects of covid often many weeks or months after their initial infection, and it is those individuals who need help.

Although we welcome the fact that the NHS has set up a new care pathway and new long covid treatment centres, there are some specific asks that I have of the Minister. First, we need that national register and better data. The covid app that has been set up by King's College London and Professor Tim Spector is an excellent start at getting some national-level data on people who have covid symptoms, people who have positive antibodies for covid, and, indeed, the effectiveness of the vaccine. The key point is that we need that data to better understand the impacts of long covid and to treat people more effectively.

My second key ask, in the time that I have available to me, is to look at the mental health impact of long covid on people. We have a cohort of people who have been traumatised with post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms while being treated for covid in intensive care. For many of them, it will take weeks and months to recover. That group need special attention in particular. I look forward to hearing from the Minister for Patient Safety, Suicide Prevention and Mental Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries), who is replying to the debate, and welcome other contributions today.

2.34 pm

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab) [V]: These are very worrying times indeed. I am worried as a Member of Parliament and people out there are extremely frightened about what is happening in this country at this moment in time. We saw a record 1,564 recorded deaths only yesterday. People are worried about what is happening and about what the challenges ahead might present. That includes the challenge of long covid, which, as we begin to learn more about it, appears to pose what can only be described as a serious threat—perhaps more so than we once believed—and it is a threat of which many people are still unaware.

The impact of long covid can be absolutely devastating. In the most serious instances, it can be totally debilitating. People can suffer extended periods of symptoms including: fatigue; breathlessness; anxiety; depression; palpitations; chest pains; joint or muscle pain; not being able to think straight or focus, which has been described as brain fog; and many others that have already been described.

A number of my constituents have been in touch about experiences they have had with long covid. In one example, a 29 year-old man has been feeling the effects since way back in February. After numerous visits to the doctors and several false diagnoses, he was finally told

[*Ian Lavery*]

he had long covid. Another example is a 26-year-old woman who as a result of long covid ended up having emergency bladder surgery and consequently developed a neurological disorder that has left her unable to mobilise without the use of a wheelchair since November. Both were young, otherwise healthy and worked in the care sector. As a result of having long covid, they have been unable to earn a proper income and show no signs of making a speedy recovery.

There is a failure of the social security system to recognise people suffering from long covid. There should be financial support for those who are unable to work, including a review of the paltry and mean statutory sick pay and of universal credit and the temporary £20 increase. We need to look after the people who have this debilitating disease. I fear that since the Government have failed to tackle successfully any other facet of this pandemic with any degree of competence, they will manage to fail in this as well.

I conclude by pleading for the Government to learn from their mistakes going forward in order to save lives and get the country back to some form of normality.

2.36 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP) [V]: I congratulate the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) on securing this afternoon's debate. For the past three years, I have been involved with individuals living with myalgic encephalomyelitis, a post-viral condition triggered by a virus such as flu or, in some cases, severe acute respiratory syndrome. Knowledge of post-viral conditions, particularly with regards to activity management, is essential for the many people now living with long covid. As early as January last year, some people expressed concerns that this mysterious new coronavirus could produce similar post-viral effects. However, the sheer numbers affected by long covid is a serious health challenge.

In addition to listening to and—crucially—believing and supporting people with long covid, health professionals should be providing guidance on symptom management. I am pleased to see that the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence moved quickly to provide guidelines for long covid, and thankfully it has cautioned against the use of graded exercise therapy. It is surprising to find a guideline recommending exercise testing. Exercise testing in people who may have an undetected cardiac pathology clearly carries a risk. In addition, the NICE guideline contains no specific guidance on the management of any of the common symptoms of long covid. That is a serious omission that requires urgent attention.

Advice on symptom management cannot be left to charities and support groups. Instead, we should be looking at how that can be delivered in primary care, with the help of, for example, properly trained community physiotherapists. There is a need for health professionals, employers and wider society to recognise that recovery from a virus takes time. Employers must identify tasks that individuals can continue to carry out, and that might be in a different setting from what they are used to doing. The Government must ensure that there is proper financial support for those affected. It may be that these people take months or even years until they

start seeing improvements in their health, and we must make sure that the support system can be just that during these times.

Today, we had a study by Public Health England that shows that those who have had covid will have immunity for about five months post-infection. Those who are living with post-viral conditions such as long covid or, indeed, ME, should therefore be considered vulnerable beyond the five months and prioritised for vaccine. Finally, it has taken decades of campaigning, largely due to the lack of belief—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I am afraid I have to thank the hon. Lady for her speech. We need to move on, because not everybody will be able to get into this debate.

2.39 pm

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con) [V]: I wish to concentrate my remarks in this debate on two things, which will hopefully show that even though long covid is not as high in word search functions, the Government and the NHS have not ignored it. My first observation is that, in the context of covid-19 itself still being a relatively new disease, the existence of long covid has been known about for even less time. I must say how impressed I am by the response of the Government and the NHS, which have put in place the comprehensive five-point plan for long covid support and made an investment of £10 million in post-covid assessment services currently spanning 69 trusts—almost half of all NHS hospitals in the UK.

Secondly, I will provide some real-time feedback from Russells Hall Hospital in Dudley North, which is my local hospital. It is one of the appointed assessment centres, and has informed me today that it has assessed more than 500 patients to date. It is working closely with primary and community care colleagues, and has produced a stratified, multi-professional offering for patients about the four main aspects of long covid, based on clinical severity and need. It is ensuring that patients with ongoing respiratory symptoms have access to imaging and respiratory nurse and clinician support, and that patients with other organ dysfunction are seen by the appropriate specialists, as are patients with musculoskeletal problems. Long covid patients can also benefit from our excellent Action Heart service, which is providing state-of-the-art exercise rehabilitation and already offers an excellent service to Dudley people. Patients requiring mental health support have full access to the NHS's Improving Access to Psychological Therapies scheme. Finally, there has been a series of workshops with local GPs and hospitals to better understand this condition and the support services required for ongoing care.

I am also advised that the clinical commissioning group is co-ordinating work in conjunction with all hospitals and CCGs across the Black Country to better understand the wider long-term impact of this condition. No doubt that will feed through NHS England so that we all have a better understanding of this terrible disease and its legacy.

2.42 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab) [V]: As we all know, long covid is a very real issue that many of our constituents are dealing with; indeed, colleagues and former colleagues

from this House are also suffering from the effects of post-viral symptoms. My friend and former colleague Jo Platt has been a great campaigner on this issue, but after 10 months of living with the disease, little progress seems to have been made. She told me that some of the online support groups have been a lifeline to her, and have helped her to find treatment, which in turn has eased some of the symptoms. However, this comes with an associated cost: Jo has told me that her supplements bill is around £90 a month. What happens to those people who cannot afford to purchase those supplements? Where is their support?

My constituent, Amy Seddon, has also contacted me about her journey. For months, she had no idea what was wrong with her, until she also found this online support and many of the pieces started to fall into place, as they would. Amy has been taking part in the COVERSCAN study, through which her own scans have shown liver changes and potential kidney issues that could have an effect on her life for many years to come. As an MP and an employer, I have two members of my staff battling with the symptoms of long covid. It is a reality for all of us.

One of the most difficult problems is that people are experiencing such diverse symptoms: some experience breathlessness, some joint pain, some anxiety, and some experience all of these together. However, we know that for all of the people who are affected by long covid, extreme fatigue is the biggest problem. GPs are not universally aware of the symptoms and are playing catch-up with long covid. I understand the huge pressures that have been put on the NHS and the Department of Health and Social Care, but there is some Government short-sightedness in dealing with this, and that is unacceptable.

It is not just a matter of further strain on our health service; the economic impact of people who may suffer from chronic conditions for years needs to be managed in a sustainable way. My hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra), who is unable to join us today, has heard from many of her constituents who are suffering. Sam, a care worker, is unable to work because of the pain caused by this debilitating condition. People going back to work before they are ready and then having to take further sick days has an impact on their long-term prospects, and that is not fair to anyone. We need strong leadership from the UK Government and from the devolved Administrations to deal with long covid.

2.45 pm

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): I commend the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) for bringing this debate to the Floor of the House today. It is much needed, and I am pleased to be able contribute on behalf of my constituents. I pay tribute to the NHS and the Government for the work they are doing on long covid; I was delighted to receive the NHS briefing on the five-point plan on long covid this morning.

The debate is shining a light on a condition that is not fully recognised or fully appreciated. The focus of our national effort, understandably, has been on stemming the virus—particularly the new strain—but against the headlines about daily cases and deaths, NHS capacity

and, of course, vaccinations, I fear that we are forgetting those who suffer from covid, survive it, but do not fully recover.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Chris Loder: If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I would like to keep going.

As I was saying, we are in danger of forgetting those whose immediate threat to life from the more common symptoms has subsided, but who are left with one of the many debilitating conditions that relate and go on to form long covid. I would like to share with the House some shocking statistics that I have found in my research over the past day or so: 21% of those who get covid suffer with it for five weeks or more—112,000 people suffered with it for between five and 12 weeks. That statistic is from November last year, so there are bound to be more. One in ten of all those who get covid suffer from it for longer than 12 weeks.

Today, I want to speak in support of children with long covid and those who care for them. Sammie McFarland is a constituent of mine, and I pay tribute to her and her colleagues, who have set up Long Covid Kids, a support group for children and their parents who are contending with some of the most difficult of long covid situations. The inspiration for the movement came when Sammie and her daughter caught covid last March and both went on to struggle with long covid. Long Covid Kids has highlighted some profound realities, which we have talked about in this debate.

I will conclude my remarks with some clear and decisive asks of the Minister. Children must be counted in long covid cases, and I fear that so far they have not been. Paediatric provision is needed in the long covid clinics. We need to raise awareness of long covid in schools. We need a plan and consideration to be given to the return to school of long covid children, avoiding fines for parents but also appropriately phasing the return of children who are recovering.

2.48 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab) [V]: I begin by thanking the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) for her superb opening to the debate and for her leadership of the all-party group.

My experience with covid began in early March, when I started to feel grotty and run down. I just wanted to rest, but as a precaution I phoned NHS 111, which suggested to me that it could not possibly be covid because no cases had been reported in M34, even though I explained to them that I worked in hotspot SW1. Eventually, typical covid symptoms developed, so I spent the next fortnight in self-isolation. The illness lasted for about 12 days, by the end of which the country was in lockdown 1, but the reality is that, although the coronavirus passed, the effects are still with me today.

Thankfully, research is now being carried out and the Government recognise long covid as being real. That has been a battle. I was lucky: my GP is brilliant, and from an early stage recognised my condition—long before it had the name “long covid”. My condition is not as severe as it was even just a few months ago. There have been real improvements, but it has been a hard slog

[Andrew Gwynne]

to get here. For the first seven months or so, the exhaustion came back frequently and to the point where just doing simple tasks around the House brought me out in massive sweats as if I had run the London marathon. I had lots of dizzy spells; I have never had vertigo before this. And oh, the brain fog! In a job where we have to be razor sharp, my short-term memory is shot to pieces. I have had to learn to pace myself. Trying to push my limits would set me back. I still have to remind myself not to overdo it.

The lasting symptom is still the brain fog. When it is bad, taking in information and processing it is so difficult. It is physically and mentally tiring, often triggering headaches, dizziness and vertigo. I am fortunate in having been able to balance work with my disabilities. Virtual participation and proxy votes have helped. I talk about the difficulties of doing my job, but what about the mechanic, the builder, the emergency worker, the teacher, the nurse—people who do not have the luxury of virtual participation, aides-mémoire, and an efficient and brilliant office to hide deficiencies? They are left to struggle and make the most of it, or to lose their jobs. On that point, the Department for Work and Pensions has to do more to recognise the condition for work capability assessments and other interviews.

I am so grateful to some of the representatives from long covid support groups for meeting me earlier this week. They want the Government to acknowledge that children can also get long covid. Of course children often present with symptoms different from adults', so an awareness campaign is required, but children should also have access to treatment in long covid clinics and throughout the NHS.

The problem of long covid is not going away; it is growing as the number of people catching covid grows. I would like to hear from the Minister about a holistic approach, with research, treatment and support in the health sense, but also in the wellbeing sense, the workplace sense and the family sense too. Let us support people and their families—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his speech.

2.52 pm

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): I am pleased to pay tribute to the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) for securing this debate on such an important topic.

I am a member of the Health and Social Care Committee, and over the past year we have heard lots of evidence from lots of areas of the NHS—from social care, patients and staff—about the challenges that they have stood up to in the face of covid and the issues that have been raised. Throughout the year, I have seen a constant change in the landscape and the battles that we are having to fight, and a constant process of relearning what we thought we knew about this terrible virus. Long covid is part of that ongoing story, as we continue to learn about it and to fight the challenges that it will bring.

The Government and the NHS must be thanked in many ways for the work that they have done to set up 60 specialist centres for long covid and for putting in place the five-point plan, but, of course, there is always

more to do. The repercussions of coronavirus will be with us not only until we are all vaccinated, and not only until we all deal with this over the next few years and start to get back together again; they will be with us for years.

There are unknowns—things that we will not know until we face them in the future. Long covid is one of the challenges that we will face and learn more about as the months—and, sadly, the years—go on. Similarly, we are facing challenges around mental health, and in that respect we are learning more not just about ourselves, but about society and how we support each other. I pay tribute to the Minister for Patient Safety, Suicide Prevention and Mental Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries), for the incredible work that she and the Government are doing to tackle the challenges around mental health, and in this area.

I say to everybody out there: let us work together on this. We have to make sure that we are sharing the stories of the challenges, because we do not yet know whether some of the health challenges that we might be facing ourselves are due to long covid. It might be affecting our families, but they might not be sharing their stories.

Let us make sure that we learn from this excellent debate and all the wonderful words that have been spoken. My message to everybody out there, including Members, is this: “Please share the challenges you are facing. Speak to your GP and your family and share those stories, because you might be one of many silent people out there. Together, combined, your voice is so much greater than on its own, and you can save lives and change lives as we move into the future.”

2.55 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) on securing this very important debate.

It is understandable that in the middle of the covid pandemic, the focus has been on primary prevention and managing the symptoms of those who become infected, but given that, as has already been said, the covid tracker survey suggests that more than 4 million people—about 12% of the population—have symptoms beyond the acute phase, which typically lasts just four weeks, with one in 10 having symptoms beyond 12 weeks, we also need to develop healthcare management responses that recognise that covid can have effects way beyond that acute phase. On top of that, we need an appropriate societal response to long covid, where people are supported during their illness and do not feel stigmatised. That is incredibly important.

I am pleased at the speed with which NICE has brought forward its guidelines for managing long covid. I particularly like the recommended holistic healthcare approach when assessing patients with symptoms between four weeks and 12 weeks, and after 12 weeks, with the emphasis on empathy and acknowledging the impact that the symptoms may be having on the patient's day-to-day life, including their ability to work. However, I was surprised that there was no reference to immunology or immune therapies. I hope that we have learned from the mistakes made in how we prevent, treat and care for people suffering with chronic fatigue syndrome, also known as ME, and post-viral syndrome.

We know that covid-19, like other viruses, attacks multiple systems—respiratory, cardiovascular, nervous and gastrointestinal—as it attacks epithelial cells, which are distributed throughout the body, but our body's ability to fight the virus depends on our immune system reacting appropriately and not overreacting. The British Society for Immunology and a number of other researchers have suggested that, in addition to long-term damage to multiple organs, the pain, muscle weakness, fatigue and even brain fog often associated with long covid may be due to inflammatory issues associated with our immune system itself rather than covid.

There is still so much we do not know about the virus, and I support calls for more research, as well as for the establishment of a disease register. More research is needed, and I am a strong advocate of evidence-based medicine, but it is important that we never let the perfect be the enemy of the good.

Finally, we must ensure, as I mentioned, that we have a societal response, not just a healthcare response. Working-age people in particular must be supported by their employers and by the Government, through the DWP. We must ensure that adequate support is provided to those with long covid who are not able to work. Stigmatising those with long covid should not be tolerated.

2.58 pm

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): The coronavirus pandemic has shed light on some of the inequalities that exist in our society. The evidence shows that those worst affected by the virus are generally those who had worse health outcomes before the pandemic, including people from less affluent communities such as Stoke-on-Trent Central.

Professor Altmann, the Government adviser and professor of immunology, was clear in his remarks to the all-party parliamentary group on coronavirus that although there is relatively little consensus in the clinical world regarding the causes and treatment of long covid, there is a shared understanding among medical professionals that long covid can affect anyone and everyone in society, including those who are young, fit and healthy. However, we know that the body's ability to recover is better if a person's general health is strong, so it is vital that we do everything we can to reduce health inequalities so that constituencies such as Stoke-on-Trent Central are not disproportionately affected by the consequences of coronavirus and the impacts of long covid.

Tackling obesity must be placed at the very top of our political agenda. We know that people who are obese are far more likely to become seriously ill and go into intensive care if they contract the virus. I believe that food labelling needs to be reformed so that we place the emphasis on promoting the eating of healthy foods, not simply junk food that is bad for people but meets food safety standards. The myriad statutory food labelling requirements from nine different agencies are bewildering and do not make it easy for the consumer.

We know the benefits of clean air and exercise for our physical and mental health. A recent report in *The Lancet* highlights a very real problem: reduced movement behaviours among children and young adults caused by covid-19 restrictions, if not adequately addressed, will have serious ramifications for long-term health outcomes.

So I welcome the recent proposal in the Centre for Social Justice report to extend the school day for years 7 to 11 by two hours for sport and physical activities.

One of the many symptoms reported by people suffering from long covid is something similar to a brain fog. This causes a lack of mental clarity, an inability to focus and poor concentration levels, and it was very eloquently described by the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne). I know that the Government are absolutely committed to investing in mental health services, including, in my constituency, with a record £15 million to fund acute and community mental health services. Many people suffering from a brain fog find respite by taking in fresh air and doing light exercise in green spaces with good air quality. So I am particularly keen to see more access in my constituency to the River Trent and to support environmental health projects.

If there is one thing that we have learned from this pandemic, it must be that the health of our nation is a collective responsibility and impacts each and every one of us. From our economy to our environment and the health of our communities, it is absolutely integral that we look after each other and our communities for our nation's long-term recovery and our ability to build back strongly.

3.1 pm

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab) [V]: Could I say that I am really pleased that this important debate is taking place today? We are all of course aware of the huge strain on the national health service caused by acute covid-19, but I strongly believe we must place an emphasis too on the treatment and support of long covid sufferers. Too often these patients feel forgotten.

On Tuesday, I participated in a briefing session organised by the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) and the all-party parliamentary group on coronavirus. It was an excellent session, and we heard some really moving statements by people who are suffering from long covid, but I want to refer this afternoon to two local cases in my own constituency of Caerphilly.

The first case is of Mr Lee David Bowen from Trethomas. Lee is a first-rate opera singer—he is a tenor—but back in February last year he had a slight cough at first and was feeling a bit chesty. His doctor examined him, and said it was either a virus or reflux. A few days later in February, Lee felt extremely exhausted, could not focus and had no energy. His situation further deteriorated, and at the beginning of March he felt really hot and as if he had the flu. He went home and isolated, but the symptoms then got worse, with him becoming ill with a sore throat, a chesty cough, aches and endless fatigue. The situation since then has not got better. Only this morning, Lee contacted me to say that, 10 months later, he is still suffering from fatigue, and he has had a few days that were very bad indeed.

The second case I would like to refer to is of Maxine Simmonds. Maxine is a hospital radiographer at Velindre hospital in Cardiff. She told me, and I quote her exactly, just a few weeks ago:

“I have been Seriously ill with Covid-19 and had some help from my GP but urgently required help from the respiratory team for a CT scan to assess risk from blood clots and assess lung damage from both Covid and pneumonia. I have also been referred to cardiology but wait to even get a referral to essential neurology.” She says her situation is getting worse, and she is no longer able to work.

[Wayne David]

I would like to say that these two cases are not isolated examples. I could refer, as other Members could also, to many other examples. I would hope that we will pay much more attention to long covid, and that we will allocate the resources to make sure that this situation is dealt with and dealt with quickly.

3.4 pm

Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP) [V]: I thank the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) for bringing about the debate, which will bring at least some comfort to some of those dealing with the effects of long covid in isolation, without access to some of the NHS support that we hope they will be able to access in the future.

We know so much more about the disease now than we did at the beginning of the pandemic, including that it is not only a respiratory disease but can be a multi-system disease, which makes it even more regrettable that some persist with the false narrative that covid only affects the vulnerable. Not only is that dehumanising and dismissive of older people and those with long-term conditions, but it is also false; statistics are coming through of many people who were previously young, fit and healthy who are now experiencing these lingering symptoms more than a month after the acute phase of their illness. Members have outlined many of those symptoms, and we are seeing research from other countries about the lingering impacts and about how these compare with previous severe acute respiratory syndrome epidemics.

Members have also laid out some of the necessary courses of action on guidance and ongoing research so that those experiencing long covid can have access to a pathway. Currently, certainly in Northern Ireland, in the absence of formal definitions, there is no recording, and therefore there will be no tracking of those affected. Extrapolating from the wider numbers of those who have contracted covid, we anticipate that around 9,000 people in Northern Ireland may be experiencing long covid. That is in the context of already horrendously long NHS waiting lists. For example, we already have 20,000 people waiting for a first neurology appointment. People seeking long-term care will be added to these lists.

The key point for Members is that an adequately funded and staffed NHS is key to caring for these individuals and others in the long term. Years of underfunding have been laid bare as the NHS struggles to cope with the peaks of the pandemic. We owe it to those who have contracted covid and those who are living with long covid and other long-term conditions, and crucially to NHS staff, to ensure that it is never again left in such a perilous state.

3.7 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD) [V]: I congratulate and thank my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) for having applied for and secured the debate, and also for setting up the all-party parliamentary group on coronavirus, which is so important in giving this House a voice in the detailed response to the issues thrown up by the covid pandemic.

One point that I really want to get across in the short time available to me is that so little is yet known about long covid. We have an emerging picture, but those in Government have to demonstrate a bit of humility in their response, accepting that we do not yet know the full picture of how this will affect people. There must be more flexibility in how the system responds to people who are affected in this way. The point has been made to me by constituents that there is a lot of crossover between the symptoms and treatment of people with long covid and those who suffer from ME; I think that point was also made by the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams). Certainly, looking back over the years at the way in which the benefits system has coped with people who suffer from ME, let alone the medical profession, we can see that this will be a problem with which we shall have to come to terms for some considerable time.

I want to share with the House one email I received from a constituent, which illustrates very well the way in which, unfortunately, people are so often left to fall between the gaps. This constituent had two part-time jobs. She worked as a tourist guide and had another job on two days a week. She wrote:

“Because of the 50-50 rule I wasn’t eligible for SEISS, so, when I was made redundant...at the end of my Furlough, I sent my P45 in hoping for Job Seekers Allowance. I have just had a phone call to say that I am ineligible for JSA as my Class 2 contributions as a self-employed person don’t count and I wasn’t”

making class 1 contributions for

“long enough... I pointed out that I paid Class 1 contributions and tax for over 40 years. She apologised and said that only the last 2 years count! I’m ineligible for UC due to my husband’s pensions (he’s 77). That means I will have to take out my minimal work pensions (the total in one pot is about £65!) in order to survive until my State Pension kicks in in 13 months.”

I am afraid that that shows the way in which too many people have been left behind and excluded from the provision that the Government have made.

Things could have been so different if only the Government had been prepared to listen to those of us who said at the start that there was a role for a universal basic income in meeting the challenge to our society.

3.11 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab) [V]: I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) and the hon. Members for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) and for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) for securing the debate and the Backbench Business Committee for scheduling it in the Chamber so that all MPs can take part.

The debate is important and timely as we pass the grim milestone of 100,000 covid-19 deaths and well over 3 million confirmed cases. We should remember each of those 100,000 deaths as the human tragedy it is as well as a sign of the failure to control the virus.

Together with colleagues who are taking part in the debate, I have heard evidence of the impact of long covid from witnesses to the all-party parliamentary group on coronavirus. The impact on their lives is profound, and their numbers are growing rapidly.

It is important to recognise that covid-19 is not binary, with people either dying or recovering fully. We still have little idea about how covid-19 affects those

who survive it in the longer term. Even people who start with mild covid symptoms may end up suffering noticeable effects and developing new or worse symptoms for months.

Among the many issues that witnesses with long covid raised at the APPG, an important factor is where they contracted the disease. Our witnesses this week all worked in the NHS, and we heard that the doctors' long covid group is expanding rapidly. It is right to ask whether the conditions on the frontline might mean that long covid is more prevalent among those who acquire it at work.

Given the devastating impact of long covid, we need to establish whether it is an occupationally acquired disease. If it is, it should be reported on, monitored and protected against, as any other workplace-acquired disease would be. Will the Minister therefore set out what the Government are doing to require employers, including the NHS, to monitor long covid among their staff, and what steps will be taken to support frontline staff with long covid?

As I said, covid is not a binary disease. It is simply not the case that people either die from it or recover fully. We must remember every covid death as the tragedy that it is, but we must also fully acknowledge and deal with the long-term impacts that the disease can have. People are living with the effects of the virus for months, and perhaps even years. They need our support. They need a health system that can identify long covid and research so that we can begin to treat it effectively. They need financial support if they cannot work.

We need a covid strategy that goes beyond preventing deaths. We need to drive cases down, even when the most vulnerable are vaccinated, so that we do not create a new generation of people living with long-term health conditions. We particularly need to establish covid-19 as an occupational disease and support the frontline staff with long covid who cannot work because of their symptoms. They must not be forgotten.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am afraid we must now move to our last Back-Bench speaker.

3.14 pm

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab) [V]: I thank the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) for arranging this important debate, which I hope will raise awareness of the issue, and cause the Government to reassess the rate of sickness benefit and to invest in research.

Long covid can affect anyone who has caught the virus. It is another one of those invisible illnesses that people cannot see, and many still do not know it exists. Constituents, friends and family have reached out to tell me of their physical and mental struggles with long covid. Persistent breathing problems and coughing, fatigue, dizziness, chest pains and insomnia are some of the things that have been mentioned to me. Even getting a diagnosis has been challenging, with people having to go through all manner of scans and tests. The lack of explanations and solutions has led to support groups being created online, where people with long covid can connect with one another and share their difficulties. But not everyone has online access and not everyone is able to communicate their experiences. Low public awareness

of long covid leaves sufferers feeling even more isolated. I would be grateful to hear from the Government how they will raise the profile of this illness.

The NHS is desperate to help these patients, but it needs help from the Government to do this. The Government need to ring-fence funding for research into the illnesses and find treatments. People with long covid also often find their ability to work seriously affected. The economy suffers from this section of the workforce being incapacitated. Sick pay is £95.85 per week. My constituent's rent in a shared home is £900, with bills, each month they are short of more than £500, and their situation is not dissimilar to that of others, which means that the sickness pay rate is inadequate.

Another constituent asks me:

"How much longer is our society going to keep treating people with illness as a burden? How long are people going to face such hard decisions just to keep living?"

Although I cannot give my constituent all the answers they need, I, along with colleagues today, call on the Government to recognise this illness, commit to reassessing the sick pay rate, and fund research treatments to cure and help sufferers with long covid.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I realise that a number of colleagues have not been able to get into this debate. As I have said, we had a very short time for it. The Front Benchers have agreed to speak for less time than they normally would, and I now call the Scottish National party spokesperson, Neale Hanvey.

3.17 pm

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP) [V]: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I commend the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) for securing this important debate. Long covid is a prevalent and growing concern that is every bit as important as community transmission rates, excess mortality rates and the consequential impacts on other life-saving services, such as cancer services. It is evident in my Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath constituency. Bailey-Lee Robb, an 18-year-old student from Lochgelly, tested positive in October. He was isolated originally in his university accommodation, but he has now returned home to recuperate. He told me:

"Due to Long Covid I'm on painkillers as I have bad lower back and knee pain; I still have a loss of smell; shortness of breath; short-term memory loss; insomnia; and some of my body randomly breaks out in rashes. While I try to lead a normal life, some days I can't leave bed because I'm that sore and exhausted. It's horrible!"

He felt that the impact on young people is important. Even if fewer young people are dying from covid-19, long covid could be with them for a lifetime. There is a pressing need for Governments to raise public awareness of long covid, to urge lockdown compliance and to limit community transmission.

Research suggests that 10% of the infected population will suffer from long covid and, in line with other post-viral syndromes such as ME, it may become a chronic, potentially lifelong condition. The president of the British Society for Immunology has said:

"As the pandemic has gone on, it has become clear that...Covid-19 is more far reaching than affecting just the respiratory system".

[Neale Hanvey]

They went on to note that this may be a consequence of a generalised systemic inflammatory response, mediated by the body's "cytokine storm" against covid. Shortness of breath can lead to pulmonary fibrosis, and circulatory, cardiovascular, renal, neurological and mental health impacts, and very real survivorship challenges, including depression and suicidal thoughts.

The British Heart Foundation, the British Lung Foundation and others also recognise the role that inflammation plays in the disease's progression. Anyone working in an intensive therapy unit knew long before covid that such a systemic inflammatory response can lead to multi-organ failure and death.

Long covid is real, and it also affects young people such as Bailey-Lee. There is limited empirical evidence on how to diagnose, support, treat and rehabilitate sufferers. In Scotland, we advocate an holistic approach, and we are currently considering the organisation of services. More than 70,000 Scots will be provided with free vitamin D, which is recognised as having a role in prevention and moderation of morbidity. This week, Food Standards Scotland launched a vitamin D campaign for the general public. The Scottish Chief Scientist Office recently concluded research calls into the long-term effects of covid-19, with funding totalling £2.5 million being recommended for nine projects across Scottish universities. In addition to that funding, the Scottish Government are supporting an ongoing study on the longer-term lung health of covid-19-related acute respiratory distress syndrome survivors, and they are also supporting Scottish participation in the UK-wide post-hospitalisation covid-19 study.

Of course, it is also key to listen to those living through the condition, such as Long Covid Scotland and the Post Covid Syndrome Support Group. That is vital to improve understanding of the longer-term effects and develop effective clinical interventions to support recovery and rehabilitation. Post Covid Syndrome Support Group founder Louise Barnes has called for a shift to effective treatment after she made contact with a clinical team in South Africa regarding a peer-reviewed study looking at the use of a six-vitamin stack protocol. Despite being sceptical, Louise felt that she had nothing to lose so participated in the trial. Within three days, she saw notable improvement:

"I felt within days almost back to normal".

That study is promising, as we know from leukaemia treatment the valuable role that vitamins or micronutrients can play. Of course, a six-vitamin stack will not suit big pharma unless they develop an analogue of the vitamin stack that they can patent. I have not looked into the detail of the study, but it is very positive and deserves serious consideration.

What is the UK Government's strategy? It is clear that we must take action now. We must properly record, research and develop means to defeat the mechanisms of long covid. Otherwise, we are creating further resource and financial burdens for the NHS well into the future. Will the UK Government develop appropriate additional support and funding for the NHS to meet these challenges, however they are to be delivered? Will the Government now accept the pressing need for continuation of the £20 universal credit uplift and its extension to legacy benefits, in the light of long covid?

We also need action on sick pay rates. The UK has one of the lowest sick pay rates in the OECD. The SNP has continuously called on the UK Government to increase SSP in line with the real living wage. It is a disgrace. The UK Government's meagre £95.85 rate of SSP is poverty pay in comparison with Ireland, where the rate is £266, and other countries such as Germany and Austria, where it is more than £280. Long-term, meaningful economic support must be put in place for long covid sufferers. Will the UK Government immediately increase SSP, so that long covid sufferers have financial support? Most importantly, will the UK Government match the Scottish Government's ambition and fund research into post-covid syndrome, allowing sufferers hope that their new normal is not post-covid syndrome or long covid?

3.23 pm

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): I would like to begin by thanking the hon. Members for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) and for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) and my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) for securing the debate, and I thank all Members for their very personal contributions.

For thousands, covid-19 is something neither succumbed to nor overcome in a matter of days. For many, it has lasting mental and physical impacts that affect the body many months after initial infection. It is nearly a year since the first case of coronavirus was recorded in the UK, and still very little is known about the debilitating post-covid syndrome. I pay tribute to the LongCovidSOS group and all the online support groups that work tirelessly to raise this issue and support one another.

At this stage, we cannot say with any real certainty what exactly long covid is. Nor can we accurately predict the true number of people suffering symptoms of long covid. The Office for National Statistics has published estimations suggesting that the proportion of people displaying symptoms for a period of over 12 weeks could be as many as one in 10. Let us be clear, this is not a syndrome being experienced by a small minority of people. There is also finite evidence on the best way to treat the condition, which has vastly varied symptoms. Without a clear understanding of exactly what the condition is, this makes it far more difficult for health professionals to manage and support those who are affected by it. With better data collection and further research, and by listening to those living with long covid, we can begin to effectively treat the condition. Will the Minister please outline what work the Government are doing to close this gap in knowledge?

What we do know for certain is that the symptoms of long covid can be severe, completely debilitating and utterly crippling, preventing people from living their normal lives. This impact can have a detrimental effect on people's mental health, their wellbeing and, as we have heard today, their physical wellbeing. It leaves many unable to return to work months after their initial battle with the virus and causes a great deal of uncertainty in already anxious minds. It is crucial to understand that this stress and anxiety can cause relapses in the condition, as sufferers themselves have told me.

Many people with long covid do not know when or if they will return to work. Without action from the Government, the long-term social and economic

consequences of this could be grave. Key workers have an increased risk of catching covid. NHS workers in particular are at least three times more likely to contract it than the general population, and this could wreak havoc on our frontline workforce. What steps are the Government taking not only to protect the NHS workforce further but to ensure that staffing levels are such that patients continue to be treated and the population continues to be vaccinated?

The availability of treatment and care for individuals experiencing long covid must be a matter of immediate concern to the Government, and I urge them to adopt a patient-led approach. Could the Minister please outline what progress has been made on setting up long covid clinics, and what plans the Government have to extend this programme in 2021? There simply cannot be a postcode lottery of service provision for long covid sufferers. No one person's life is more valuable than another, and the Government must ensure that that is reflected in access to treatment.

Some long covid patients are being denied referral because they never had a positive covid test. For the many people who suffered with covid in the first wave back in March and April and were not eligible for testing at the time, that is proving incredibly frustrating. Will the Minister outline what measures the Government will take to ensure that people do not miss out on much needed treatment, particularly if they fall into the category of people who were unable to have a covid test in the first wave?

The Government have to step up and show leadership. There has to be clear messaging to the public to ensure that they are sufficiently informed about the condition and about where to seek help if they need it. That messaging needs to combat the misinformation about covid that is out there presenting it as a myth or similar to the flu. I would like to pay tribute to the former MP for Leigh, Jo Platt, who, along with LongCovidSOS and support groups on Facebook, is campaigning tirelessly on this issue. As Jo told me, there are no words to describe how covid deniers have made her feel. She said: "For people to seriously deny our experiences has been soul-destroying." We have to get this right.

It is also essential that healthcare professionals at every level of the NHS are properly trained to treat long covid, distinguishing between the different conditions that fall under the term. This includes frontline mental health workers, as the mental health implications of long covid can be severe. Within an acute crisis, it is far too easy to push longer-term concerns to the periphery. Should the Government continue to do this with long covid, they do so at their peril.

Throughout this crisis, far too many people have felt that their voices have been silenced. For the sake of the health and wellbeing of all those living with long covid, please do not silence them. There is still so much that is unknown about this virus and how it affects us, but one thing that is certain is that long covid should be a matter of serious concern, and without concerted action by the Government we may be living with the consequences of this for many years to come. We are still learning so much more about the impact of covid-19 on our communities, our bodies and our wellbeing. There are thousands of people out there currently suffering with long covid. They are relying on us, and on the Government, to get it right for them.

3.29 pm

The Minister for Patient Safety, Suicide Prevention and Mental Health (Ms Nadine Dorries): I thank the hon. Members who tabled today's debate on this very important topic. We know that long covid can have a significant impact on the people affected, and I am proud that this Government are committed to doing everything possible to support people who are still suffering with effects on their mental and physical health.

Covid-19 is still a new disease. Indeed, the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) began by identifying that the disease pathway of covid is so new that we still do not have the evidence to understand fully what long covid is. It is not yet clear what the medical, psychological and rehabilitation needs will be for those experiencing long-term effects of the virus.

Typically, the time to recover from covid-19 is 10 to 14 days for mild and moderate cases; however, some people may experience lasting impacts on their health. Long covid describes a mix of mental and physical health effects. Research from the ONS has shown that one in 10 people has covid-19 symptoms for 12 weeks or longer, and it estimated in mid-November that around 186,000 people were experiencing symptoms between five and 12 weeks post infection.

I will start by giving an update on the important work that the Government and the NHS are leading into long covid. We continue to work closely with the NHS and other stakeholders to develop and deliver high-quality services for patients, to make rapid progress in terms of research, and to ensure effective communications and engagement with the public and the workforce. The NHS launched a five-point plan for dealing with long covid and providing support on 7 October 2020 and, just as it rapidly stood up specialist care for acutely ill covid-19 patients at the start of the pandemic, it is now responding sensitively and effectively to long covid.

The NICE guidelines for long covid, and how to manage it, were published on 18 December. For the first time, we have clinical definitions and terms for the initial illness and long covid at different stages. The guidelines describe the most commonly reported symptoms of acute covid-19 and long covid. Acute covid-19 covers the signs and symptoms for up to four weeks; long covid, or post-covid syndrome, is commonly used to describe the signs and symptoms that continue after acute covid-19. The guidelines also set out the support that long covid patients should receive.

The NHS announced the "Your COVID Recovery" online service on 5 July. That online tailored rehabilitation programme enables patients to be monitored by their local rehabilitation teams, and phase 2 was rolled out in November to provide further support for people with long covid. In October, NHS England announced £10 million to fund a network of assessment service centres in each part of England. Those new services bring together doctors, nurses, physiotherapists and occupational therapists to offer both physical and psychological assessments, and refer patients to the right pathway of treatment and rehabilitation.

The Secretary of State spoke to the House in October about his visit to the cutting-edge long covid clinic at University College hospital. There he met people in their 20s and 30s who are living with the long-term effects of the virus. It has completely changed their lives. There are now 69 centres operating across England,

[Ms Nadine Dorries]

where hundreds of patients are already receiving treatment. Those centres are assessing and diagnosing people experiencing long-term health effects as a result of a covid-19 infection.

A further 12 sites are earmarked to launch in early 2021, and they will be in the east midlands, Lancashire, Cornwall and the Isle of Wight. The NHS and the wider scientific community are currently working to better understand the disease: the course of the covid-19 virus, including symptoms, severity and duration, long-term effects, and how best to support recovery. NICE and UK Research and Innovation have invested £8.4 million in a post-hospitalisation covid-19 study at the University of Leicester. This is one of the world's largest comprehensive studies of the long-term health impacts of covid-19 on hospitalised patients. The study aims to better understand and improve long-term outcomes for survivors following hospitalisation with covid-19. The National Institute for Health Research and UKRI have also announced a joint research funding call for ambitious and comprehensive research into the long-term physical and mental effects of covid-19 in non-hospitalised patients. The panel is currently reviewing the bids and projects and this is expected to commence in early 2021.

The NHS has launched a long covid taskforce to help to lead the NHS response to long covid. It will produce information and support material for patients and healthcare professionals and develop a wider understanding of the condition. Led by the director of primary care at NHS England, Dr Nikita Kanani, the long covid taskforce brings together patients, charities, researchers, clinicians, policymakers and the royal colleges to provide an advisory function and to support the delivery of the NHS five-point plan. My colleague the noble Lord Bethell continues to hold monthly long covid roundtables to provide updates from NHS England, NHS Improvement and others working on various areas of long covid.

The covid-19 vaccine marks the start of a fightback against the pandemic. The NHS is deploying vaccines right across the UK and this has reached 3 million today in line with the founding mission to support people according to clinical need, not ability to pay.

Long covid is a new challenge for healthcare systems all over the world, not just in the UK. The UK is committed to listening to people with long covid and leading the way in excellent research, treatment and care. I pay tribute to the hard work and dedication of the NHS staff who set up these services to quickly meet sufferers' medical needs all over England, to the researchers working hard to better understand this issue, and to the people living with long covid for sharing their insight and their experience with us. Combined with further research, the NHS England long covid taskforce, and the additional services and funding that we are providing, we hope to improve lives and aid in and fight against this global pandemic.

3.37 pm

Layla Moran [V]: I thank all Members who have contributed to this debate, but also all those who were unable to contribute. When we put in for it, we thought

that it would be well subscribed, given that, I would wager, most Members in this House will have been contacted by a constituent, or more than one constituent, who now has long covid. For all those with long covid who are watching today, I hope they have the assurance that this House will continue to listen and encourage the Government to take action as our understanding of this disease improves.

We certainly heard some powerful stories today. There is obviously not time to go through all of them. I was struck, as we always are, by the contribution from the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), who brings the subject to life with his own experience but also rightly asks: what about those who do not have the flexible working that is afforded to us as MPs?

Several Members mentioned that there are learnings that we must take from other conditions. In particular, ME was mentioned by the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), among others. I thank her for her work and leadership on the all-party parliamentary group on ME. There is a lot that we can learn from that.

The hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) rightly raised mental health, and the trauma that people face as a result of being hospitalised with covid. I think that almost all Members mentioned financial support, and many highlighted the failure of the welfare system to cope with this changing landscape. That is an area that we continue to need to push on. My right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) put it very well when he said that the Government need to take a humble approach to the changing picture.

I thank the Front Bench spokespeople, and particularly the Minister for her response and for listening so diligently to the debate. I thank her for the update on the research and the NHS response. It is clear that we are finally getting going, but I hope that she also recognises that we need to continue to finesse and change as our understanding evolves. I hope she will take a personal interest in that. Finally, it would be wonderful if she would consider a meeting with me and others in the all-party group, to talk about the areas that she did not cover, in particular publishing the register, if that is possible, and a recognition by employers that long covid could be an occupational disease, and the support that would be needed by those who suffer from it.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Lady for winding up the debate, but we now need to move on because we have another full debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered long covid.

Madam Deputy Speaker: We will now have a two-minute suspension to allow preparation for the next debate.

3.40 pm

Sitting suspended.

Covid-19: Dental Services

3.43 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the effect of the covid-19 outbreak on dental services.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) who co-sponsored the application for this debate, and the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. I also thank many MPs from across the House for their support for this important and timely debate.

I am speaking on behalf of everyone who has suffered toothache under lockdown, or who will suffer it this year, for all the children whose orthodontal treatment has been delayed or is in disarray—that includes two children in my own house—and for all those whose more serious dental problems would have been spotted in routine check-ups, but who have not yet had them spotted. I speak also on behalf of dental practitioners and laboratories in my constituency and across the country who have felt ignored during the pandemic, and not treated as the frontline health workers they are.

During the pandemic, one constituent told me that he had to pull out his own tooth, and a local dentist told me of an elderly lady whose dental pain meant that she could not eat solid food throughout the lockdown, and had lost weight as a result. There are serious consequences to the implications of covid-19 on dental practices. I would like to thank the dentists in my constituency and across the country, who have kept going in very difficult and stressful times, and often against all the odds.

My message today is simple: we are sleepwalking into the biggest oral health crisis since the creation of the NHS. Unless the Government begin to recognise that dentistry is an essential health service, the sector will collapse. For now, the current activity targets are unattainable and need to be scrapped—I am sure other Members will be talking about them today. In the longer term, we also need better targeted financial support to save the sector. Overall, we need a national dentistry recovery plan to provide safety for dentists and patients, funding to stop closures, and ways to address the huge backlog of dental appointments. There is an NHS England phased recovery plan, but it does not address the whole dental sector. Dental care is not a middle-class luxury, but it is moving that way. It is a fundamental aspect of good health and a key indicator of health equality. We neglect it at our peril.

From March to June last year, all routine dental care in England was paused and according to the British Dental Association over 20 million appointments were lost between March and November. That has created a huge backlog that will take years to clear unless it is addressed now. In my own borough of Wandsworth, nearly 6,000 fewer courses of treatment took place in the final quarter of 2020. It did not have to be this way. For example, in Germany, personal protective equipment and guidance was put in place straightaway and dentists were not shut. Funding of PPE and ventilators remains a major issue for enabling dentists to function and see patients even during the pandemic.

Dentists have faced acute financial problems. They are both frontline health services and important high street businesses in all our communities, yet they did

not receive the same funding as other frontline health services or high street businesses. Financial support remains either absent or uneven. As many as 53% of dental practices estimate that they can only maintain their financial stability for 12 months or less in the face of lower patient numbers and higher overheads. Beyond access to the furlough scheme and Government credit, support for private practice has been close to non-existent. There has been a failure to recognise the mixed economy on which dentistry is based. Dentists are among the only businesses on the high street that continue to pay business rates. That is totally unfair. Many of my local practices have not received any financial support, such as business grants, and this must be renewed.

Now, on top of that, there are targets. In December, NHS dental practices were instructed by the Government to deliver 45% of all their targets, based on pre-covid levels, to earn their contract value from January to April. This was a hasty, not negotiated and widely discredited target-based dental contract, and it is incompatible with providing safe and sustainable services for patients during the pandemic. I understand that the targets were set before lockdown, but now is the time for the Minister to tell us that they will be reconsidered, they are not achievable and there will be a change of policy. The targets need to be scrapped.

Most dental practices are small high street buildings and they cannot expand to meet the guidelines on social distancing and fallow time as well as meeting the targets. The British Dental Association found in a recent practice poll that 40% of practices in London alone have seen more than half their capacity wiped out by cancellations, staff sickness, self-isolation and difficulties accessing childcare. If there was ever an excuse not to visit the dentist, we have one now. We have told everyone to stay at home, so they are staying at home and they are not going to the dentist, but that is just building up huge problems for us in the future. Dentists cannot be financially penalised because of that.

The latest UK data show high levels of cancellation and non-attendance during lockdown. One local dentist told me that at absolutely full stretch before Christmas he was able to meet 30% of pre-covid activity levels. He cannot meet them now, and he is worried about being penalised and losing money retrospectively, because he is obviously having to pay out for those contracts during these months. We would all like more people to be able to see dentists. We would like them to reach 100% of the targets and to clear the backlog, but the targets are simply unachievable at the moment and will put the future of dental practices at risk. By implementing this target, the Government are effectively removing the safety net from NHS dentistry at a time when covid-19 rates are surging. It is important to note as well that the target is set not by the chief dental officer, but by the Government. The wider implications of these issues extend beyond just bad oral health or a bit of toothache. It is predicted that it will increase emergency attendances at hospital A&E, increase antibiotic prescribing, increase admission to hospitals and longer stays, and increase missed oral cancer diagnoses, which is really worrying. The Oral Health Foundation found that mouth cancer referrals fell by 56% during the lockdown.

In my constituency, the waiting list for tooth extractions by children's tertiary care is now two years and growing—that is an almost emergency treatment. I met with

[Fleur Anderson]

dentists in my own constituency in the lead-up to this debate, and they made it clear that the 45% target is just unacceptable. One said to me:

“How can the dental profession be expected to transition to this flawed quota system? Practices that fail to reach targets, through no fault of their own, will face penalties and clawbacks which will result in mass closure of dental practices as the funding to provide dental care will not make it viable to stay open. This is a reckless and unsafe decision”.

Today, the Faculty of General Dental Practice UK, the College of General Dentistry and the Royal College of Surgeons Of England issued a joint statement saying that

“safety must take a clear priority over dental activity levels during the...lockdown.”

There is a universal call to scrap the targets, and I hope that we will hear about that from the Minister later.

To wrap up, I have five demands of the Minister. First, we need a national plan for dentistry following the pandemic and a way that the backlog of appointments will be addressed, created in full consultation with the national professional dental bodies. Secondly, the activity levels for January to April must be scrapped. The 45% target will undermine patient care and safety. Thirdly, we must provide urgent support to practices to enable them to increase the number of patients that they can see. That means supplies of PPE and ventilation equipment to keep fallow time down. Fourthly, we need to be clear that all dental teams, including receptionists, must be given priority access to covid vaccines alongside other healthcare professionals. Fifthly, we need to maintain and expand the business rates holiday to dental practices and backdate it to late March.

In conclusion, many parts of the country already had poor access to dental care before the pandemic. Current levels of capacity across the service mean that, unless something is done now, problems are likely to reach an unprecedented scale in every community up and down the country, and we will see a whole generation growing up with poor dental health. Let us recognise the dental sector as the essential frontline health care service that it is and do everything in our power to support it through this crisis and for our future.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I have a few housekeeping notes. The wind-ups will start at 4.42. There will be eight minutes each for the Front Bench teams, two minutes for Fleur to wind up, and a three-minute limit on all Back-Bench contributions starting now.

3.53 pm

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): Three minutes means that I cannot answer the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson). I congratulate her on obtaining the debate. I am chair of the all-party group for dentistry and oral health. I have a surgery in the Putney constituency—she did not visit me. Sensibly, dental surgeries, after the initial lockdown, have remained open, but, as she has mentioned, there are costly new anti-covid requirements. Currently, the figures of the backlog of appointments are staggering and, in response to those figures, new NHS targets have been set. Understandably, they are

high. I have seen the British Dental Association’s sponsored letter. I went for a pinch of salt when it arrived on my desk. I understand that 60% of the practices are actually meeting those targets and that those that are unable to meet the targets can obtain dispensation. Scaremongering on safety in surgeries is just that—scaremongering. Dentists are medical professionals. They are overseen by the Care Quality Commission and by the General Dental Council. Safety is paramount. Most alarming—and this has been mentioned—is the drop by a third, as I understand it, of oral cancer detection and referral.

My next concern is that many of the clinical teaching staff at our hospital dental schools were drawn away to assist in urgent dental care and covid patient care. As a result, many of our final-year students are facing graduation with a clinical educational deficit.

However, I think it is worth looking forward. First, I thank the Minister for helping to move inoculations for dentists and all staff into category 2, which is a recognition of the dangers of the aerosol dispersal spray. Secondly, can she look into the long fallow time? Other nations have managed to make this somewhat shorter and safe. Next, we need to look after the children who require hospital general anaesthetics. In the long term, that has to mean prevention, and the very best long-term means of prevention is to introduce fluoridation into water supplies, particularly in deprived areas. While this backlog must—and in time, will—be cleared, prevention has to be the long-term aim. Caries is preventable, and it is something we can do something about in this nation as is progressively being done in others, by teaching children to brush their teeth and to use a fluoride toothpaste, and putting fluoride into the water supply.

3.56 pm

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab) [V]: I am grateful for the opportunity to raise the increasingly urgent problems with dental care in my constituency. Portsmouth is a densely populated city, and pre-existing problems with patient access and the retention and recruitment of dentists have been exacerbated by this pandemic. Figures from the BDA suggest that 43% of adults in Portsmouth had seen a NHS dentist in the past two years up to June 2020, compared with 48% across England. Figures also show that the fall in the proportion of patients seen in my city during the pandemic has been greater than the average across England. I am very concerned that Portsmouth has been disproportionately affected by the weakness of the current contract system, and that we face the prospect of generational damage to patient care.

The recently imposed NHS activity cut targets are particularly illogical, with practices facing steep financial penalties if they fail to hit 45% of their pre-pandemic NHS activity during the current quarter. Those targets effectively force NHS practices to prioritise volume over need, leaving them with little choice but to conduct routine check-ups instead of clearing the backlog of more time-consuming treatments. This creates an unsustainable situation, in which patients are unable to access the treatment they need while practitioners are in a race against time to maintain their financial viability. Although the Government have committed to reforming the system, we have seen no action and little appetite to do so.

Earlier this week, I met with the BDA's local dental practice committee and Healthwatch Portsmouth. They told me that the situation is untenable, and practices are increasingly concerned that they will not survive beyond the pandemic, which will further restrict patient access. With nowhere else to turn, one constituent contacted me to help arrange a dental appointment over Christmas. Having been unable to register for a NHS dentist, another constituent joined the 7.6% of English households that have attempted a do-it-yourself tooth extraction using pliers to relieve their pain.

While these stories are anecdotal, they increasingly reflect the reality of dental care in my community. Without urgent change, NHS dentistry in my constituency and across the country could be decimated, permanently damaging patient care for decades to come. I call on the Minister to take action to protect patients and dental practices in Portsmouth, and to hear my concerns today.

3.58 pm

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con) [V]: May I take this opportunity to thank all in the dental profession for all they have done and, in particular, for how they have adapted to implement the huge changes needed to be covid-secure? I have direct experience of this, having received urgent care both during the first lockdown and yesterday. I know that I am not alone in thanking them, as several of my constituents have told me of their own experiences. On behalf of all of us, I thank them very much for what they are doing during these trying times.

At the beginning of the pandemic, dental practices across the country were instructed to close. This meant that dentists took a huge financial hit, which was compounded by the fact that many were ineligible for the Government's financial support package. This was particularly true of private dentists. We rely on these practices as much as NHS ones to meet local demand, and that should be considered going forward.

NHS dentists have recently been asked to fulfil their contractual obligations in the last quarter of the financial year. However, in order to meet additional safety guidelines, they now see fewer patients. Indeed, 64% of practices surveyed by the British Dental Association last year estimated that they could only treat less than half the patients they saw before the pandemic. Practices also have to cater for the self-isolation of staff and patients, the general fear of older residents leaving their home for any reason and cancellations at short notice for all of the above.

I emphasise that dental practices are safe and continue to be so. I am grateful to the Leicestershire and Rutland Local Dental Committee, which allowed me to attend its Zoom meeting last night and hear the concerns of 112 local dentists. In an online vote, 80% of those dentists said they would not be able to hit the target for quarter 4. The added dimension is that should dentists miss the target by as little as 1%, they receive considerably less revenue for the work they have already carried out. Dentists are also given no leeway for last-minute cancellations and no-shows in their contracts, even though that may lead to those missed targets. I therefore ask that that be urgently reviewed, so that dentists are not punished for trying their hardest to continue to provide the care needed.

I can fully understand why the target was set when it was put in place just before Christmas. At that time, little was known about the new variant of covid and the case rate was dropping at a rapid rate. If it had remained in that arena, I certainly would have been clamouring for tier 2 in Loughborough and fighting to get as many businesses and facilities open as possible. Unfortunately, the new variant has put paid to that idea and a national lockdown has ensued. I ask that the target for dentists be reviewed in light of the current situation.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call Scott Mann.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con) [V]: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker—(*Inaudible*)

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Scott, you sound like a Dalek, and I do not mean that unkindly. There is clearly a communications problem. We will switch to the next speaker and then we will get you back, Scott.

4.2 pm

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab) [V]: The Book of Proverbs says:

“Confidence in an unfaithful man in time of trouble is like a broken tooth.”

We are in a time of trouble and there are lots of broken teeth. While I make no aspersions about the fidelity of the Prime Minister, I can tell him that confidence in his Government, even before covid, was already at an all-time low with the dentists I speak to in Brent. There has been a total lack of investment in dental laboratories, a failure to recruit and train dental technicians, flawed dental contracts and chronic underfunding.

My hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) has lucidly set out the key demands of the British Dental Association: abandon the activity targets; support practices to increase the number of patients they can see safely; prioritise access to the vaccine; safeguard the supplies of PPE; and extend the business rates holidays to dentists. I will not rehearse and repeat her excellent arguments; I want to give voice to the frustration felt by the dentists who continue to serve my constituents in Brent so well.

The BDA has catalogued the failure to properly communicate with the public, but what I had not appreciated until I spoke with my local dental committee is just how poor the Government's communication with dentists themselves had been. I quote from their letters. One said that

“dental services have often been treated as an afterthought with no understanding of the NHS contract imposed on the profession. Dental practitioners found out in May on the news, at the same time as patients that they were to reopen in June... The panic and frustration this caused is deplorable. Dental practices, despite being high risk because of the aerosol generating procedures, were not able to access PPE from the Government portal until September and the vital FFP3 masks were not added to that until November. It is clear that little thought, if any, had been given to dentists and their teams.”

One dentist wrote:

“When on the 8th June our high street practices in England were allowed to resume face-to-face care, the reality of what a new normal might look like hit... fallow time means the number

[Barry Gardiner]

of patients able to be seen is significantly reduced. It was anything but “business as usual”. I ask myself, at this time, what would be the worst thing to impose on dental practices? Very high up on my list would be precisely what the government has decided to impose—targets. The emphasis on targets from the NHS clearly prioritises a metric and finance over patient interest. To achieve targets, footfall would have to increase and non-urgent patients be prioritised.”

My local dental committee tells me:

“Many practices are already finding the conflicting strain too much, and this comes on top of the emotional and physical drain of wearing full PPE for hours every day...The imposition of a target at this time serves no purpose whatsoever other than to destabilise, perhaps terminally, NHS dental provision, and to demoralise an already exhausted profession further.”

Covid-19 has been felt most severely by those who were already more likely to have poor health outcomes—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Sorry, Barry; we are going to have to leave it there because we have run out of time. I will call James Wild next, and then hopefully we will get Scott Mann back on the line.

4.5 pm

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): Access to dentists in North West Norfolk, particularly for children, was one of the issues that I raised in my maiden speech, when I reported that constituents were being advised to register in Skegness. As I said at the time, that remains good advice for pink-footed geese, but it is not very practical. Prior to covid, my constituency had the highest population per dentist across Norfolk and Waveney. West Norfolk was the second lowest area for dental activity actually delivered in the country, with only 65% of contracted activity carried out, and it had the highest percentage of patients who were unsuccessful when trying to get an NHS dental appointment. That was before covid.

During the pandemic, access to services has become even more severely limited, as the early results of a survey that I am carrying out in my constituency show. Many patients are unable to get treatment. The British Dental Association has said that 20 million appointments have been lost nationally, and access to emergency dental care has also been very challenging. I have helped constituents to access the urgent dental care that was there, but the General Dental Council reported that 50% of people did not know that it existed, which may explain why a fifth of people experienced pain or even took action into their own hands.

It is crystal clear that the level of provision in North West Norfolk is simply not good enough. This is a long-running issue. I have spoken on numerous occasions to the NHS east of England direct commissioning group, whose responsibility it is to commission those services, to underline the need for improved local access. I certainly acknowledge that there are challenges in attracting and recruiting dentists in North West Norfolk, and there have been positive developments, such as the opening of the surgery at Marham, which my constituents have been using successfully. I know that the commissioning group is actively exploring the increased use of training places to play a part in the sustainable approach to this issue, but it is of course important that the significant backlog due to covid is addressed and done so safely.

Like other hon. Members, I have been contacted by dentists in my constituency, who are concerned about the activity levels that they are being asked to deliver and question whether they will be achievable. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister will address those concerns in her remarks.

What my constituents really want is a commitment to short, medium and long-term improvements, so they can actually see a dentist. My dentist in King’s Lynn high street closed in November, and the money for that should be used to recommitment services locally. Prior to covid, the NHS planned to open another practice by the summer and to issue a procurement exercise offering in-perpetuity contracts, which should be more attractive to providers in the long term. Understandably, those plans are now on hold, which is disappointing for my constituents. They want a public commitment to address these issues, so that they know improved provision will be coming. I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to meet me to discuss these issues so that we can urgently address the provision, which is certainly inadequate for my constituents.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Let us see whether Scott Mann’s audio is less scary.

4.8 pm

Scott Mann: Apologies from North Cornwall, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) for bringing forward this very important debate. In the three minutes that I have got, I would like to address the wider issues around covid and NHS dentistry in places like Cornwall, the 2006 contract, and the challenges of recruitment and retention in rural areas.

We have exceptionally long waiting lists for NHS treatment in places like North Cornwall, with many people waiting years on the NHS list, and at the moment we have a limited number of dentists providing that NHS work. Many of the practices and dentists in my constituency are servicing more than 8,000 or 9,000 patients. That is not sustainable in the long term. Population growth in Cornwall has compounded that issue. Having met many dentists in my constituency, I am aware of the problems, and I look forward to working with the diligent Minister on the Treasury Bench to resolve some of them. The 45% target should be looked at again, because meeting those demands in the current environment is quite tough.

Those local issues are magnified in the national picture. Normally, someone presenting to an NHS dentist needs emergency work, which takes quite a lot of time. The contract is onerous. The 2006 contract was not great when it was introduced, but with time it has become less and less effective. It needs to be reviewed. I know Cornwall is not unique, but the problems become more acute the further one gets from the big cities. We do not want oral health inequalities across the country. The levelling-up challenge is an economic one, but we need to be aware that there are health shortcomings affecting those who live remote areas.

Looking at solutions, I have picked up on the fact that we used to have a scheme to recruit dentists in the short-term from the Commonwealth. Now that we have left the European Union, we can look again at the rules that apply, and I think we should do so. We should also

look again at the 2006 contract and work with the General Dental Council to see whether we can fast-track people becoming dentists and working in practices.

We should consider how we can manage costs. Someone who earns £100,000 a year has as much chance of having an NHS dentist as someone on a low income. We could handle that better. All power to the Minister—I know she gets this. I look forward to working with her to get better dental health outcomes in North Cornwall.

4.11 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) on securing the debate.

Before the pandemic, my engagement with the dental sector led me to form a number of views on how it served our communities. Those who work in dentistry are highly competent and well qualified professionals, but there are problems in recruitment, and it is increasingly difficult to find an NHS dentist. When good and highly respected dentists retire, they are hard to replace. There is a lack of accountability in NHS England and NHS Improvement, and the world of UDAs—units of dental activity—is opaque and difficult to understand.

One readily reaches the conclusion that in normal times, the system does not work in the best interests of local communities and public health. Covid-19 presents those working in dentistry with enormous challenges. They are placed in a position of significant health risk, there is a dramatic reduction in capacity, and there have been some problems with those working in the sector being recognised as key workers.

The Government were right to set up a network of urgent dental centres, and in many respects this has worked well, although I have received a lot of complaints about where and how to find them, being kept waiting on the phone for seemingly hours on end, and then difficulties getting an appointment. Not only is there the challenge of getting through the current lockdown, but the shadow of covid will hang over the sector for a very long time. There is an enormous backlog of work, and yes, although some of that may be classed as non-emergency, it is important to bear in mind that it is often a routine visit to the dentist that picks up cancer at an early stage.

The position has been exacerbated by the Government writing to dentists before Christmas seeking to impose a 45% target of UDAs for January, February and March. The proposal has been described to me by dentists in my constituency as “completely irresponsible”, “disrespectful”, “neglectful”, “unsafe” and “inconsiderate”. It should be dropped. The Government need to work with dentists to come up with, first, a short-term plan to get through the immediate crisis, and then a long-term plan that is easy to understand, provides proper accountability and full national coverage of NHS dentistry, and ensures the recruitment and retention of highly trained professional staff.

4.14 pm

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab) [V]: Like so many aspects of our lives over the last year, the pandemic has meant changes for dentists and for our constituents as patients. During the first lockdown last year, dental care was paused and emergency dental hubs were set up as

back-up, naturally creating a backlog of patients in the system. Already in this new lockdown, practices are facing patient cancellations and staff sickness and self-isolation. It is clear that Government support is needed. No patient or dental practice should be put out for doing the right thing during the pandemic.

Over the last year, I have met dentists and heard from practice managers across Luton North, who have told me about the challenges of keeping people’s mouths healthy during a global pandemic. One Luton North practice got in touch this week to tell me that dentists have been told that they must still hit their targets of 45% for dentistry and 70% for orthodontics, even in this new lockdown. That seems grossly unfair.

Across all health services right now, patients are reluctant to attend appointments for non-emergency treatment. Many GPs are not seeing patients face to face unless absolutely necessary, but the Government and the NHS are asking dental staff to put themselves at risk. The new obstacles that covid has brought are preventing dentists from being able to do their best for their patients. Will the Minister take these issues away and consult dentists?

I was shocked to find that dentists are not recognised as key workers, so they will not be in the highest priority groups for the covid-19 vaccine. I understand that priority must be given to those most at risk of serious illness or loss of life, but dentists are healthcare workers. Dentists are essential, and they are put in high-risk situations with respect to covid on a daily basis. Will the Minister please lobby her colleagues and NHS England to put dental workers on the same level as healthcare workers when it comes to vaccinations?

Let me finish with an even bigger ask. We know that dental health is a determinant of other health and public health issues and matches up with other health inequalities that are caused by or can lead to poverty and other kinds of ill health. I therefore want to see the Government listen and rise to the challenge that dentists in Luton North have put to me over the last year.

4.17 pm

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) on securing this debate.

The impact of covid on the dental sector has been profound, from the sector’s closure in March to the 20 million lost appointments, the 15 million-appointment backlog and the year-on-year decrease in those who visit the dentist. In previous years, being able to avoid the dentist may have seemed an art form, but it is rapidly becoming a significant and desperately serious problem, with mouth cancer diagnoses significantly down and major operations being put on hold or just avoided due to lack of access.

It is right that we have to clear the significant backlog. While I do not oppose the concept of a UDA target, I do oppose the mechanism that penalises dentists who do not meet that target. I respectfully ask the Minister to consider whether the target could be rejigged so that people have the security and understanding that if they are unable to meet it, they will not see a loss of salary or any penalisation from the Government. Of course, we have already heard that 50% of dental practices are meeting that target, so we have seen an ability to deliver.

[Anthony Mangnall]

The intent is right, but the mechanism is wrong and only adds to the extra stress that those who work in dental practices are already suffering. I do not deny that dental practices in my constituency are safe, but the individual set-up of each is very different; things such as the air purification systems that they implement will mean that they have different fallow times and will therefore also impact the UDA issue. There is a result here whereby different circumstances will mean that the overall target is unable to be met.

I ask the Government to consider taking away the penalisation mechanism of UDAs, reimbursing the VAT costs faced by dentists on PPE, and ensuring that our dentists are treated as part of the primary healthcare network. We hope to encourage people to stay in this sector. We want them to do so—we do not want them to go towards private alone—so I hope that the Minister will be able to reassure me and many of the dental practices in my constituency.

Dentists are not asking for any more than anyone else, but they have received significantly less than many of those out there. All that we ask the Government today is to treat our dental sector with the respect that it deserves and to help it deliver for those who most need it across the whole United Kingdom.

4.19 pm

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab) [V]: I will start by commenting on the imposition of activity targets. On 17 December 2020, during a statement on coronavirus, I called on the Secretary of State to reverse this shocking and unacceptable decision. With a new national lockdown that could well last months, this situation is now more acute than ever. In his response, the Secretary of State said that an

“agreement...has been reached with the dentists”—[*Official Report*, 17 December 2020; Vol. 686, c. 410.]

However, that is not how the dental profession interpreted the end to negotiations. The BDA has made it clear that it could not agree to such terms and that new contract requirements had been imposed on them. That in no way, shape or form constitutes an agreement. In the interests of accuracy, will the Minister clarify today that no such agreement was reached and that these targets have been imposed on dentists against their will?

Dental practices are now being asked to deliver 45% of their annual UDA target in order to receive their usual contract value. Surely the Government must recognise that this is simply impossible during a national lockdown. Many contract holders will hit a financial cliff edge and be required to return the majority of their contract value. Other practices will be forced to prioritise routine work such as check-ups for lower-risk patients, at the expense of urgent care and preventive work, simply to survive financially. For some years now, the Government have accepted that the dental contract needs reforming and that we need to move away from flawed UDAs. It is therefore unbelievable that the Government have decided to enforce a system based on UDAs in the middle of a pandemic. These are the wrong targets at the wrong time, and the Government should think again.

Unfortunately I know all too well about the crisis in access, because barely a week goes by when I do not have a constituent contacting me because they are unable

to get a dental appointment for either themselves or their families, and often they are in severe pain and discomfort. Just last week, I was contacted by a nurse at a mental health hospital who is unable to get dental appointments for her patients. The shortage of community dentists, who are too thinly stretched, and high street practices that have to prioritise reaching UDA targets means that these vulnerable patients have no access to dental treatment at all.

That is one shocking example of what many Members know is true: it is increasingly difficult for our constituents to get an NHS dental appointment at all. The choice the Government now face is to either allow the situation to keep getting worse or to act now and bring in a new contract that does away with UDAs, to ensure that every patient gets the care and treatment they need.

4.22 pm

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con) [V]: I feel compelled to speak in this debate following my meeting with several dentists from Don Valley last week. I want to start by commending the work of NHS England and the British Dental Association in reaching a compromise in July, which saw the abatement figure agreed at 16.75% for the period when dental practices were instructed to close. At the time, the British Dental Association stated that this was a “fair number”. However, it is my understanding that the abatement has not yet been collected from the practices. Can the Minister provide greater clarity to practices and state when the abatement will be expected to be paid?

As Members will know, dentists are currently being expected to hit 45% of pre-pandemic activity, at a time when people are being told to stay at home, and triage activity is no longer being included in activity measures. If activity falls below 36%, practices will have to return the majority of the NHS funding they receive in the first three months of this year. That policy will directly put NHS dental practices at risk of closure, as the clawback is potentially disproportionate. With the country now in full lockdown, patients’ reluctance to leave home is leading to many missed and cancelled appointments, so for many practices this demand is impossible. In fact, figures from NHS England show that the demand for dental practices to reach 45% of pre-pandemic activity is already failing.

Penalising dental practices at this difficult time will not help reduce the backlog. The Government have continually adopted a pragmatic approach throughout this pandemic. Would it not therefore be reasonable to abandon the activity target of 45% while the country remains in full lockdown, and include triage as part of the activity measures? Increased targets should be delayed until 1 April, when there has been more vaccine roll-out and the virus is under better control. Again, I would appreciate a comment on this from the Minister.

I would like to finish by stating something I saw scrawled on a wall in one of our many public houses: “A man with toothache thinks everyone’s happy whose teeth are sound”. We would be wise to remember this, as we could all be in a very sad state if we lost our dentists.

4.25 pm

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab) [V]: Can I, too, express my gratitude to my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) for securing this debate?

Dentistry often does not get the attention it deserves when we are looking at health provision for the country, and today is an opportunity to address that.

Clearly, the pressure on dental services preceded covid-19, but the pandemic has exacerbated it. In normal times—if we can remember them—the demand for NHS dentistry in Sheffield was huge, with unmet need amounting to more than 35,000 patients. That clearly has a long-term impact on oral health, and one that is particularly worrying for children.

Then came covid-19, which has hit the sector hard. Frankly, to choose this time to impose new targets, without warning or consultation, shows either a lack of understanding or a lack of regard for the consequences. The 45% target will disrupt the priorities of dentists by imposing penalties for failing to hit levels of what are described as normal NHS activity in what are blatantly abnormal times. It will threaten the viability of practices, and worsen access to dental care across Sheffield and the rest of England.

Dental practices have made huge efforts to be covid-secure, with cleaning and air-clearing procedures that mean they cannot see as many patients as usual. Many have therefore prioritised emergency and urgent care, and this normal activity target will skew their priorities away from those patients most in need. As one dentist explained it to me, they will be

“forced to stop seeing emergency patients...and to push the limits of the sound infection control procedures brought in to protect patients and staff”.

Another simply said:

“These targets are the wrong choice at the wrong time”.

This is not scaremongering, as has been suggested, but a real and genuine concern from dental professionals who care about the services they provide.

Sheffield Central is in the top 10% of areas where NHS dental care was most impacted by the pandemic, according to a survey, and the Association of Dental Groups says that problems are particularly acute in the most deprived urban, coastal and rural areas. Imposing this target will hit those most in need—levelling down, not levelling up. We need to be growing our dental services, not threatening them with damaging targets.

I have great regard for the Minister—we have worked together on other issues, and I know she takes her responsibilities seriously—so I do hope that she will listen to the concerns she has heard today from both sides of the House, talk to colleagues and review this contract.

4.28 pm

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con) [V]: It is an honour to be able to speak on this topic, but I have to admit to a slight conflict of interests, as my father, who worked as an NHS dentist for 39 years, is now deservedly enjoying his NHS pension.

Dentists were allowed to return to work on 8 June, with all sorts of new conditions in place—for example, PPE having to be put on and removed, deep cleaning of surgeries between patients and a period of fallow time for each surgery. Special regulations for aerosol-generating procedures and social distancing in waiting rooms meant that accurate timings were necessary to avoid people having to wait outside for too long. All these things meant a big impact on the number of people who could

be treated, so there was less ability to complete target numbers. Additionally, on returning to work, there was a huge backlog of emergency-type dentistry.

Dentists were adapting to these new conditions and striving to meet new targets when suddenly, just before Christmas, and without agreement from the profession, their target of activity was increased from the original 20% to 45%, and it had to be completed by 31 March. This has angered the profession. Now, with the lockdown, it is worse. Some dentists operate a shift system in surgeries, allowing time for cleaning and fallowing, but older patients, of whom there are more in my constituency than any other in the country, may not want to come at unsocial hours and wait outside at this time of year, or they may be shielding and fearful of infection, with rates rising. All this contributes to dentists' difficulty in reaching targets. It is no wonder that they are not happy. What does this mean? That safety could be compromised if dentists are forced to cut corners to achieve targets. With a lack of NHS dentists already in North Norfolk, this situation will only make problems worse.

I will quickly touch on the real problem of the lack of NHS dentists in my constituency. There may be many problems, but I have constituents simply not able to get treatment and having to go private for services. One surgery told me that they have not had a UK graduate apply in 10 years, as they want to work in London. What can be done to help that situation? Here is my plea: if you are a graduate dentist wanting to work, do not go to London, come to North Norfolk, where you will have a better quality, will be paid well and will have a lower cost of living, and your patients will be eternally grateful to see you.

Despite all this, patients overwhelmingly express appreciation for the efforts dentists are making at this challenging time. They and the patients deserve proper assistance from us.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Other areas are available. Good try, Duncan!

4.31 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab) [V]: The breakdown of talks on NHS dentistry targets between NHS England and the General Dental Practice Committee is a failure of leadership on the Government's behalf. The Government should intervene to reach agreement and alleviate the concerns shared widely across our dedicated dental profession.

Like others, I have been contacted by a dentist in my constituency who is concerned that, with the new covid variant being highly transmissible, and with the national restrictions, or lockdown, it is

“unfathomable that the government has chosen this time to introduce an increase in the target for activity required by dental practices holding an NHS Contract, by effectively more than doubling the minimum requirement of activity to 45%”.

I agree that, with covid rates still high, many patients will be understandably reluctant to go to the dentist. Indeed, British Dental Association analysis shows that more than 20 million appointments were lost between March and November 2020, more than half the treatment in a typical year. I agree with my constituent who queries why Ministers are encouraging potentially unsafe volumes of patients into NHS dentist practices under the imposed new activity targets.

[Rachel Hopkins]

The imposition of severe penalties for not reaching these minimum targets will be untenable for many practices already struggling to meet additional costs due to covid. Many will be at increased risk of closing for good. This would be a terrible situation for my constituents in Luton South, as Luton struggles with a very high level of poor oral health in our children: the severity of tooth decay in children aged five years is above the national average, at four teeth affected. Evidence suggests that deprivation accounts for 40% of the variation in levels of dental decay. Children aged five years living in the most deprived areas of Luton have higher rates of tooth decay than their counterparts in the least deprived areas and are two and a half times more likely to have experienced dental decay. If dental practices are forced to close, it will be harder for my constituents and their children to access the vital dental care they need. The long-term impact of poor oral health affects people not only physically but psychologically, as it influences how they look, speak, eat and socialise.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) said, access to dental care must not become a middle-class luxury. The current target and penalties are bad for practices and patients. I urge the Minister to get back round the negotiating table and revisit the activity targets for January to April to protect our vital dental practices during the pandemic and give them the support they need.

4.34 pm

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con) [V]: One of the very first issues I was contacted about as MP for North Devon was poor NHS dentistry provision, long before covid took hold. I knew that was the case because the only NHS dentist practice I could register with is a 45-minute journey from home.

This time last year, a dental nurse contacted me to advise:

“We are seeing more new patients with severe treatment requirements and high levels of decay because they have had to wait so long to get a dentist and cannot afford private treatment. This leaves patients in pain and at risk of sepsis in some cases. Dental Nurses in North Devon are poorly paid as there is no band structure like other nurses, this means there is a high staff turnover”.

She was concerned that dental nurses could earn more in a bar or supermarket, but with less responsibility.

Now, during covid and heading towards post-covid, it is nearly impossible to get anything other than emergency NHS dental treatment in North Devon. I was fortunate enough to see an NHS dentist in London, but my constituents should be able to access NHS services here in North Devon. Private dentists have begun to fill the gap here and NHS dentists are moving to the private sector.

Those in the private sector are also now in contact with my office with their concerns about the dental health of patients here. One advised:

“As a private dental surgery owner we have been very quick to return to near normal levels of service despite carefully implementing the increased Covid secure measures. NHS services have not! As a result we have been inundated with poor patients in pain and unable to access their NHS services. When they have been treated many are being forced to pay private charges. For too long NHS practices were allocated I believe 80% of the contract value for delivering 25% of the contract and for Q4 of the contract year

they now have to only deliver 45%. This is woefully inadequate as it is far more profitable for these surgeries to not deliver care than it is for them to open.”

There are concerns that NHS patient contributions are not being charged correctly and that patients simply cannot access the treatment they need from their NHS dentists.

We had to travel long distances to get dental treatment in North Devon long before the pandemic. Distance and now cost are stopping far too many people seeking the dental treatment they need, and I hope steps can rapidly be taken to address the situation with NHS dentists in North Devon as well as the wider position described in the Chamber today.

4.37 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD) [V]: One of the more surprising effects of covid-19 is that I miss going to the dentist—a phrase I never expected to use. Although we might recognise the impact on ourselves, we should be in no doubt about how difficult the situation has been for those who continue to work and provide vital dental services in the pandemic. It is different from the situation in hospitals, but still difficult and exhausting, and it carries the constant underlying worry of infection.

The situation affects the whole UK. I hope that the Government will take the impact on dental health into account in discussions with Holyrood. That is a significant motivation for me today, because we have accounts of problems across the UK. James Craig of the Scottish Dental Association has described the experience of wearing a respiratory mask so tight that it was like breathing through a pillow. Another dentist felt that the profession had been thrown under a bus. Dentists have had to try to deal with public demand and then abuse when they cannot deliver through no fault of their own.

We must also accept that there are wider consequences for our health services as existing NHS dental health care becomes stretched, meaning that NHS-commissioned activity targeted at oral health inequality will be at risk. Many of us could find it difficult to get timely access to urgent, unscheduled dental work. As that begins to take hold, increased unmet care will have a widespread impact on our general health and wellbeing, leading to more and more people turning to GPs, emergency care and potentially hospital admissions.

Research shows that, as with so many of the impacts and so much of the collateral damage from covid-19, the vulnerable will suffer most. That will exacerbate the health inequality on which the pandemic has brought a stark focus.

Recently, I was contacted about an issue that young dentists assure me affects them across the UK. Associate dentists' earnings have been halved because their payment is based on the work they carry out and the number of NHS patients on their books. We are currently awaiting the outcome of discussions between Holyrood and BDA Scotland to find a solution. Like everyone else affected by the pandemic, they need a solution soon.

I once put off having a toothache checked out, because it was not much of a nuisance and I was busy with other more important and pressing stuff; I would mention it at my next check-up. Before that was due, it flared up, became much worse, and I needed emergency root canal treatment. I also got a lecture from my dentist about

leaving problems so that they escalate and become more serious. It is sound advice that we should perhaps listen to in this situation.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call Janet Daby. Janet, I will stop you at 4.42 pm, so please ignore the clock at the bottom of the left-hand side. Then we will come to the Front-Bench contributions.

4.40 pm

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab) [V]: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) on securing the debate. She has been a persistent advocate for dental care during the pandemic.

We are all aware of the widespread impact of the coronavirus pandemic. A&E departments are overwhelmed, intensive care units have been described as warzones, and essential operations, for example on cancer patients, are being postponed at great cost. In the midst of the sprawling crisis, the effect on dentistry has been overlooked. People have not received the essential dental care that they need, and dental practices have experienced crippling blows to their finances during the pandemic.

The Association of Dental Groups has found that dental practices in England suffered from an average of 45% losses in 2020. Dentists are crying out for Government support, but the Chancellor's recent announcement applies only to the hospitality and retail sectors. Dental practices will receive no grants and no business rates exemption. The Government need to act so that it does not have a negative effect on our economy.

The ADG found that 35% of business owners expect to employ fewer staff next year, with some planning redundancies. We will lose practices from our high streets, and communities will be deprived of the care that they need. That needs urgent Government intervention and attention. The Department of Health and Social Care must work with other Departments to provide business support grants and relief. Additionally, dentists are still not acknowledged to be critical care workers in this lockdown—a matter that has already been mentioned by other Members, and that the Secretary of State needs to review. Patients have also had to—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Sorry, Janet; 4.42 pm has been reached. I do apologise. We move on to the Front-Bench contributions. I call Alex Norris.

4.42 pm

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I join colleagues in commending my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) for securing this important debate. Timing is everything in politics, and this is well timed indeed. I will cover the point that she made about imposed targets shortly, but I do not want to miss the contributions that she made about health inequalities and cancer, which I thought were really important.

I do not think that it is a great surprise that there was cross-party coverage and, frankly, a lot of consensus. Concerns about the targets were expressed by my hon. Friends the Members for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan) and for Bradford South (Judith Cummins), the hon. Members for Loughborough (Jane Hunt) and for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher), my hon. Friends the

Members for Luton North (Sarah Owen), for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) and for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), and the hon. Members for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker) and for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall). I must say, though, that a spirited case for the defence was made by the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford).

I was glad to hear dental labs brought up by my hon. Friend the Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner). I will address them myself, but they are too often lost in this conversation. I also thought that important contributions were made by the hon. Members for North West Norfolk (James Wild), for North Cornwall (Scott Mann), for Waveney (Peter Aldous) and for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) about the pre-covid status quo not being what we should aspire to. Again, I shall address that myself.

Dentistry, like every industry, has had to battle its way through this pandemic—closed at first, worried for jobs and livelihoods, reopening desperate to address growing need, and innovating to do that as safely possible in challenging circumstances. We should be very grateful for the work that dentists and their staff have done and are doing, but even with that work 20 million appointments were lost between March and November. That is a backlog that we will live with for many years.

Although the dental profession has adapted well to provide urgent care through covid, the crisis has highlighted the need to do things differently and to do things better. As we rebuild post covid, we have a unique opportunity to not return to business as normal but instead shift the focus of dentistry in this country from the short term to the long term, and from the reactive to the preventative. I strongly believe that a more prevention-focused approach is something that many dentists across the country want for the benefit of their patients. I know that the chief dental officer is a big advocate of prevention being at the heart of NHS dentistry.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I spoke to the hon. Gentleman beforehand. There are some 6,000 registered dental technicians who provide dental implants such as crowns and bridges to 80% of UK patients. It is predicted that 1,000 of them will lose their jobs by July 2021. If that happens, we will be unable to address the issue of dentistry in the future.

Alex Norris: I completely share that perspective, and I will cover that in my final points.

On prevention, I hope that the Minister will make a commitment that the Government want to move towards a preventative model. If she does that, the Opposition will work with her to deliver it.

Of course, there is a more immediate issue at hand. On 17 December, as colleagues have said, NHS England imposed new activity targets on NHS dental practices, which took effect at the beginning of this month. At the beginning of the pandemic the Government were right to step in and offer dentists their full contract for a much smaller proportion of their usual activity. We supported that then and we still do. It is also right to seek to increase capacity to help tackle the backlog, and avoid NHS patients being pushed into the private sector. However, what has followed is a mess, with negotiations between NHS England and the General Dental Practice Committee breaking down, and so targets being imposed

[Alex Norris]

on the sector, with practices needing to hit 45% of their pre-pandemic activity targets in the first quarter of this year.

Allowing negotiations to break down like that, rather than intervening to ensure that an agreement was found, is a failure of leadership by this Government. Where have they been on this issue? Whether we think that dentists are right or wrong in their perspective, and whether we think the figure should be 45%, 55% or 35%, surely we would agree that an imposed target is a failure of leadership.

It simply will not do that such a crucial part of our health service has working arrangements that discomfort it so greatly. NHS England would never pursue a work pattern that is dangerous, but there are reasonable questions about how practical it is. It is not just dentists raising that; we have had public pronouncements of concern from the faculty and the colleges. There should have been a negotiated deal that found common ground. I know the Minister is a consensus builder and I enjoy working with her. I hope she will say that she will step in to build consensus and fix this, and Labour will support her in that venture.

In the meantime, I hope the Minister can offer some reassurance on areas of concern relating to this: first, if practices do not hit that 45% of pre-covid activity, and instead land at between 36% and 45%, any reduction will be proportionate to the full payment; it will be downscaled in ratio. However, below 36%, a practice will drop off the cliff edge and not get its contract. That is concerning because in November that would have applied to 40% of practices. Those targets were put in prior to the third wave of the pandemic gripping, and we know that is having an impact. Eight in 10 practices have seen increased cancellations or missed appointments, and three quarters of practices have experienced staff absences this month alone.

Will the Minister therefore reassure the House that she will look again at that element to ensure that dentists have a fair chance of meeting targets and are not unfairly penalised if they do not, through no fault of their own? I know there will be a regional analysis of whether there are extraneous factors. I hope the Minister will endorse and double underscore that today.

Secondly, will the Minister offer reassurances that the use of units of dental activity will not incentivise just the treatments that fit in a little more easily—for example, check-ups that do not require fallow periods—while disincentivising more urgent complex care, and care that does not count towards the target? Thirdly, I am concerned about the wellbeing of dentists and their staff, because 45% of UK dental professionals feel that their mental wellbeing is worse compared with the start of the pandemic. What steps are in place to support our workforce? We have a duty of care towards them.

I will conclude with a point about dental laboratories. They make the crowns, bridges, dentures, and more, on which dentistry relies. While the Government acted quickly to protect the dental industry—as I said, we supported them on that—there has been nothing for dental labs, which have seen their orders collapse. Many have shuttered and will never reopen. People are leaving that skilled profession, but we are going to need them again, and in greater volumes as we catch up. Instead,

we will now buy those products from the continent and beyond, all around the world, and we will have lost skilled work because we let it wither. I hope that the Minister will use this opportunity today to announce relief for that.

Dentistry is a vital part of our NHS. Dentists and their staff have fought valiantly to keep the industry going in unprecedented times. Now they are at a crossroads and need political help. The Government must step up and resolve the contracting issue, and work with dentists to build a new exciting future for dentistry, preventing ill health, rather than chasing it. If they meet the moment, we will support them, but if they do not we will call them out.

5.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jo Churchill): I congratulate the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) and indeed the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) on securing this important Back-Bench debate. It is the second debate we have had on dentistry in about 10 weeks. Access to dentistry is, I think, something that unites us across the House. There has been something of a paradox during the debate, however. On the one hand, we have spoken about how patients cannot access the service they need and how we have seen demand rise so that now we essentially have only urgent and essential care waiting out there for us when we get through the pandemic; and then we have spoken about the fact that it is challenging—I agree, it is challenging—to reach 11.25% of an annual quota in the next three months. I hope to explain how we are ensuring that that is to support patients. I was quite saddened that support for patients was perhaps a quieter voice in the debate than support for the profession. This is only going to work if we support them both.

The pandemic has had, and continues to have, a significant impact on dentistry. First, I want to put on record my gratitude to dentists and their teams for their work in this difficult year. Dentists and their staff kept vital care going through the initial peak both remotely and in frontline urgent dental care centres. In addition, many volunteered to be deployed, if needed, on frontline covid services. Their contribution as healthcare professionals has been, and continues to be, greatly appreciated.

In early 2020, the nature of the novel virus that causes covid-19, and consequently the risks for dentistry, were unknown. However, we knew that the risk of transmission via aerosols, which are frequently generated in dental procedures, was high. As a result, face-to-face urgent care at the start of the pandemic was restricted to designated urgent dental care centres. Over 600 were stood up and they remain open to support all our constituents. The remainder of NHS high street practices were asked to provide remote consultations, complemented by the triple As: advice, analgesics and, where appropriate, antimicrobials.

In the initial guidance issued by Public Health England, dentists had to wear enhanced PPE and, crucially, to upgrade transmission-based precautions through their practices. This meant, obviously, that there was more time between patients and fewer patients could be serviced. I would just like to clarify a point. All NHS dentists can access free PPE from the e-portal, which has now delivered over 1 billion items to our frontline NHS

services. To reduce the risk of subsequent transmission by airborne or droplet route, a post-procedure fallow time is needed.

All dental practices, as we have heard, were able to start offering face-to-face NHS care from 8 June, providing they had the appropriate PPE and infection prevention and control procedures in place. All dentistry could start, including private dentistry. Most dentists—this has not come out today, particularly—operate a mixed NHS and private model, but whether private or NHS, as a profession, dentists put their patients' needs first and they resumed their services as soon as they could.

All NHS dental practices in England should now be offering face-to-face care, but during this difficult period practices have been asked to prioritise urgent care, address any delayed planned care and ensure provision for vulnerable groups. So they are not taking the easy route of just doing the routine, but focusing on the people who need it most. Actually, dentistry was difficult beforehand in rural and coastal areas. The UDA introduced in 2006 does not work particularly effectively, but we cannot change that here and now, so we have to try to provide care to as many people and as many of the most vulnerable as we can.

Between 1 April and 31 December, dental contracts were paid in full, minus the abatement—the agreed deduction for running costs—in the initial lockdown period. As stated, that has not yet been taken. The focus is now on increasing dental provision as safely as possible. Important work has been done to determine how we reduce those fallow times in surgery. The advice has been made available through the UK infection prevention and control guidance for dental settings set by the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies. It is a national benchmark for infection prevention and control that is applicable to patient care in all practices in England. The consensus on fallow time published in the IPC guidance has allowed for a reduction in the time between patients and in some cases, if possible—particularly where there is ventilation—to reduce it to 10 minutes from the time the dentist places their equipment down, perhaps while the patient leaves the room, until they pick it up again for the next patient. This is an important step forward.

We have been working closely with NHSE on what level of NHS dental services can be safely delivered to the end of March. The letter was published in December setting out the requirements for NHS dental contractors in the next three months, and where activity targets are not met, perhaps through sickness or other challenges, an exceptions process is quite rightly in place. We are asking dentists to record the DNAs—patients who did not attend—sickness and all other things that might militate against them being able to deliver 11.25% down to 9%, so less than 10% of the activity they were delivering last year.

I hope that provides reassurance, and I hope that all hon. Members will understand that at the forefront of these considerations is the safety of patients and the safety of dentists and their dental teams. They are essential workers. They are in category 2, they are patient-facing frontline health workers and they are to be vaccinated in the first swathe. Indeed, I know that the chief executive of my own CCG is contacting all the dental surgeries that have been listed so that they cannot

be missed. Obviously there is little jurisdiction over private practices; we have an influence over NHS practices, but not over how private businesses proceed.

My personal view is that a transformation in dentistry is necessary, particularly if we are to address the challenges that the pandemic has highlighted and the inequalities, particularly around children's oral health. I wish to see a change in the way we approach dentistry and oral health. I have asked officials and NHSE to ensure that high-quality preventive work is at the forefront of future provision and that a transformation in commissioning takes place. We have an enormously talented profession out there whose skills are not being utilised. They can help us not only with the mouth cancers that are not getting diagnosed if they are not seeing patients but with dietary advice. They can do so much more. They diagnose conditions such as diabetes, by noticing the inflammatory nature of the mouth. There is a huge opportunity to deliver a greater range of health advice, monitoring and support, using dentists and their teams. Arrangements for 2021-22 and beyond are being worked on, and I expect this to be done despite the pandemic and worked on urgently.

Before I close, I would just like to add my support to the call by my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) for fluoridation. That is something I am extremely sympathetic towards, for the benefit of children's health. I am clear that, in looking at these options, nothing should be ruled out and patients should be our first priority.

4.58 pm

Fleur Anderson: I thank all the MPs who have spoken in this debate from across the country, showing a lot of cross-party agreement on what we are asking for today. The message from all those people who contacted their MPs about this debate—dentists and patients—is loud and clear: dentists cannot reach their targets at the moment. That will mean financial insecurity and the destabilisation of dental provision that already has problems, which will impact patients. I say respectfully to the Minister that she has not heard the patients' voice, and that actually, patients really want their dentist to be there in the future. That is the risk that we face at the moment.

I welcome what the Minister said about free PPE—I hope that includes ventilators—and the commitment to vaccinating dental staff, but I respectfully say that I do not think she has provided reassurance. The exceptions process has been demanded by dentists contacting all the MPs we have heard from today. So it is going to be a massive application with a huge amount of red tape. It does not allow for the space constraints of dentists, the sickness being faced by dental staff during lockdown, and the message to stay at home, which is stopping people going to the dentist. I ask her to reflect on the whole debate, to rethink the decision, to get around the table with the British Dental Association, to look again at those targets and to meet me, if possible, to talk about this further.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the effect of covid-19 on dental services.

Vitamin D: Covid-19

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Michael Tomlinson.*)

5 pm

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): May I start by giving my thanks to the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) who cannot be with us today, but who is a fantastic ally of mine in this campaign to help protect our public?

Today, the nation is facing the second peak in the worst health crisis in living memory. To date, nearly 85,000 people have died. In November, the death rate was 175 fatalities per million, in December that figure was 222, and it looks as though January will be more than 324. To deal with this catastrophe, the Government are reluctantly instituting tough lockdowns and considering even tougher ones. Whether these measures work is disputed by some, but there is no doubt that they are incredibly costly—in economic damage, in individual freedom, in mental health, and even in lives lost to other causes.

As the death rate per million climbs month by month, from 175 in November to 324 now, the strategy certainly is not working as well as we would hope. Compare that with the province of Andalusia, a Spanish province of more than 8 million people. It started in November with a situation worse than ours—189 deaths per million as against 175—but which cut its death rate by at least two thirds while ours was doubling. That reduction, from between 50 and 70 deaths a day in November to between five and 15 deaths a day currently, started immediately after it initiated a programme of issuing calcifediol, the fast-acting high potency form of vitamin D, to at risk groups including care home residents.

The first thing that I will ask the Minister to do—not today obviously, but afterwards—is to look closely at that policy experiment and see whether vitamin D was the key to what is a spectacular success in cutting death rates by anybody's measure. I believe that the Government in Madrid are reviewing it. So should we.

For decades, researchers and medical professionals have been warning that there is a pandemic in vitamin D deficiency, with more than 1 billion people worldwide being vitamin D deficient. The warning bells for this ignored pandemic had been ringing long before the World Health Organisation declared the outbreak of covid-19 as an official pandemic on 11 March last year. Those warnings should have been especially loud in the UK, as our vitamin deficiency levels have been described in a recent research study as “alarmingly high.”

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that, given that children have been precluded, for very obvious reasons, from taking the vaccine, we need to be proactive in building up their immune system? Will he join me in asking the Minister and the Health and Social Care Department to work with the Education Department to provide free vitamin D to every school-age child? I have asked the Minister in Northern Ireland to do the very same.

Mr Davis: It is an excellent idea and I do join him in that request.

On the question of medical education, it has long been understood that vitamin D plays a critical role in calcium uptake and the prevention of diseases such as rickets and osteoporosis. That was what was thought to be its main effect. Since 1983, there has been a large amount of research demonstrating its critical involvement in the body's immune system. Many of the mechanisms involved are now very well understood. By 2017, it had been clearly shown in a number of randomised clinical trials that vitamin D deficiency was a very significant issue in acute respiratory disorders such as flu, colds, pneumonia—the lot—and correcting the deficiency with supplementation could reduce the severity of symptoms by as much as 70%. This and other research showed that vitamin D had a critical role in the activation of both the innate and the adaptive immune systems and in modulating some of their responses, most notably the now infamous cytokine storms. Deficiency in vitamin D led to compromised immune systems and, as a result, susceptibility to a number of diseases, most particularly respiratory diseases but of course also covid-19. Despite this evidence to suggest that vitamin D has wider health benefits than just bone health, and despite our particularly exposed situation in the UK, our public health bodies have done little to correct this problem.

At the beginning of the covid-19 crisis, several well-respected research teams noticed a high correspondence between low vitamin D levels—deficiency—in the blood and severity of covid-19 symptoms in patients. Early evidence suggested a strong link between the two, with studies showing that 40% of patients who suffered severe covid-19 outcomes were vitamin D deficient compared with 4% of those with sufficient levels of vitamin D. Moreover, mortality rates of vitamin D deficient patients were dramatically higher than for patients who had sufficient levels of vitamin D. These were correlational studies, so they were not proof of causality, but they were massively indicative given the prior evidence of the importance of vitamin D to the immune system. So this was startling evidence.

Therefore, in early May last year, I wrote to the Health Secretary calling on the Government to urgently review the available evidence to assess the role that vitamin D could play in helping us to combat this dreaded virus. The Health Secretary, quite reasonably, handed this work to his health advisers and ordered them to undertake a rapid review of the evidence. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence attempted to analyse the statistical data and came back unconvinced. The problem is that correlation is not a proof of cause and effect, and a correlation, albeit a strong one, was all that we had at that point. In effect, NICE said that more data was necessary. One would think that at this point it would have initiated a large, well-designed random control trial to pin down the question: is vitamin D a causal factor in bad covid outcomes in terms of morbidity and mortality? After all, it is an incredibly serious disease and this is a very cheap and safe treatment. Not only did it not do this, but two applications for funding to carry out random control trials were turned down. Since then, more general global evidence in many other countries has grown in strength, which makes the inaction all the more questionable. Several studies have been published showing how low vitamin D levels lead to poorer outcomes for covid-19 victims.

In September 2020, the results of the world's first randomised control trial—the gold standard of medical research—on vitamin D and covid-19 were published. The trial, conducted in the south of Spain at a hospital in Córdoba, involved 76 patients suffering from covid-19 sufficiently badly to have been hospitalised. Fifty of the patients were given vitamin D and the remaining 26 were not. Half of those not given vitamin D became so ill that they needed to be put in intensive care. By comparison, only one person of the 50 given vitamin D required ICU admission—just one. To put it another way, the use of vitamin D seemed to reduce a patient's risk of needing intensive care twenty-fivefold.

Other studies have shown, at a statistically significant level, large reductions in mortality too. There was an experimental study conducted at a nursing home in France with 66 participants. The outcome of that study was that taking regular vitamin D supplements was associated with less severe covid and a better survival rate. Evidence from the United Memorial Medical Center and Sentara Norfolk General Hospital, both in the US, showed that they could get a more than 75% absolute risk-of-death reduction and reduction in mortality when treating patients with a cocktail of treatments including vitamin D. Researchers at Eastern Virginia Medical School who designed the protocol estimate that if their approach, including vitamin D-to-patient management, had been widely implemented at the start of the pandemic, it could have saved many, many thousands of lives.

The results of these studies are stark and clear-cut, and what was originally dismissed in some quarters is now backed by leading medics around the globe. Richard Carmona, the 17th surgeon-general of the United States, has said:

“The response to the pandemic...should include an effort to aggressively eliminate what is becoming apparent as a morbidity and mortality risk factor in COVID-19—vitamin D deficiency.”

Dr Carmona pointed out that the classical criteria for dealing with correlation evidence was, ironically, drawn up in this country by the great British physicians Sir Austin Bradford Hill and Sir Richard Doll in their study of smoking and lung cancer. They deduced that it was possible to use correlational data to show causality if certain other conditions could be shown: consistency of evidence, specificity of evidence, dose responsiveness and what they called temporality, which basically means that what happens first is the cause and what happens second is the effect—it is fairly obvious when you put it in English.

The simple fact is that we can show that all the Bradford Hill criteria are met for vitamin D and covid-19 if we look at the many separate individually small but collectively persuasive studies. Every single one of the criteria can be seen to be met. That is presumably why Dr Anthony Fauci, famously the head of the US Coronavirus Task Force—a difficult job at the time—has said:

“There is good evidence that if you have a low vitamin D level... you have more of a propensity to get infected”.

These are serious voices that are now backed up by serious evidence.

To give the Government proper credit, they have instigated the provision of a supplement free of charge to the clinically extremely vulnerable in care homes. However, if supplementation is to have any material effect,

the dosage has to be sufficient to correct the existing deficiency. Sadly, with the Government's programme for the clinically extremely vulnerable, the supplementation falls far short of this. The Government are providing supplements of 400 international units, or IU. That is in line with what the national health service currently recommends to tackle issues surrounding bone health. By contrast, the American health authorities recommend 600 IU to 800 IU depending on age. The latest research from the Royal College of Physicians recommends that health authorities should urgently recommend a higher supplementation of 800 IU to 1,000 IU a day, which would more than double the current daily recommended dose of vitamin D.

However, even that dose—based on bone health—is not high enough to provide the additional benefits and protect against respiratory disorders such as covid-19 for those with existing deficiencies; it must be much, much higher. We are not aiming to protect elderly people in care homes from rickets. We are aiming to protect them from a lethal disease, which is a very different issue.

The vitamin is safe in quite high doses. In the summer months, a person could sunbathe for 30 minutes and get the equivalent of 20,000 IU—much more than would be taken in a daily dose. All the modern toxicological evidence indicates that if there are any deleterious effects at all, they do not happen until a much higher dose than 20,000 IU. Even the NHS, which is very cautious on this, accepts that a dosage of 4,000 IU a day is perfectly safe; it says so on its website. What is needed to provide adequate protection against covid-19 is a significantly higher dose of up to 4,000 IU per day, particularly for those vulnerable groups that tend to be deficient in the vitamin—namely, the elderly, ethnic minorities and those suffering from a number of medical conditions.

Providing the supplement to the clinically extremely vulnerable in care homes is a small step in the right direction. However, it is a drop in the ocean compared with the action the Government should be taking overall. There needs to be a wider scheme providing supplements to all at-risk populations, including the elderly, the obese, minority ethnic groups, diabetics and people with high blood pressure. That would be a tiny cost compared with other health initiatives. A year's supply of a daily dose is likely to cost about £15 a person, so allocating it to the identified risk groups would amount to £45 million. Allocating it to those groups plus every ethnic minority citizen would cost about £200 million, and to every clinically obese person and at-risk people in other categories would cost a little more. However, those figures could be halved if the risk is more severe during the winter months and we just gave the dose then. The benefits would be enormous. That cost is a mere rounding error when we measure it against the cost of not defeating the pandemic or the cost of a lockdown.

It is by no means a coincidence that the United Kingdom has one of the worst mortality rates in the world. After all, we have one of the worst rates of vitamin D deficiency in the world—about 40% of the population—and with that, very high levels of people with compromised immune systems. However, Public Health England continues to refuse to acknowledge the growing evidence linking vitamin D deficiency and poorer covid-19 outcomes, and for this, we are now paying the price.

[Mr David Davis]

Vitamin D could be one of the tools that helps turn the tide in the fight against this terrible virus. Vaccines, of course, are now being rolled out, but it will still take some time to reach levels sufficient that lockdowns are no longer needed. The Government are doing a great job on vaccines, but there are limits to what they can do, and unlike the general effect of vitamin D sufficiency on the immune system, vaccines are very specific. If a person has a specific mutation, the vaccine can be rendered obsolete; that is not true of vitamin D. In the meantime, vitamin D supplements could be provided to all at-risk groups more quickly, and at a lower cost.

As I said at the beginning of my speech, the UK has now had nearly 85,000 covid deaths. It is long past the point where we try anything with even a marginal chance of success to prevent those deaths rising even higher. Well, vitamin D has much more than a marginal chance of success: we now have good reason to believe that vitamin D supplementation will help reduce mortality from covid-19 and cut susceptibility to infection. It will save lives, improve population immunity, and help reduce the medical and economic impact as we continue the universal roll-out of vaccines.

There is now no reason not to act. After all, in the Secretary of State's own words, supplementation has "no downsides"—he was right. The surgeon general whom I quoted earlier said that we should not let covid-19 patients die with vitamin D deficiency while we "wait for perfect evidence". Vitamin D is cheap; it is safe; it has many other proven health benefits; and, as the Government of Andalucía have shown, it could be a dramatically effective weapon in our fight against covid. There is no more time to waste. The time to act is now, Minister.

5.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jo Churchill): I am extremely grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) for having secured this debate, as well as to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon); it would not be an Adjournment debate if he did not play his part.

As we have always said, the Government consistently review the latest data and information on covid-19 as it emerges. This, of course, includes the progress there has been in treatments for those suffering with the virus, as well as preventive measures. I would like to express my thanks to health and care workers and to the scientific community, whose dedication and hard work has made this possible, and I am sure right hon. and hon. Members from across the House will join me in doing so. Over the past months, there have been reports about vitamin D potentially reducing the risk of coronavirus, and I am aware of colleagues' interest in the relationship between vitamin D and covid-19. I welcome the opportunity to discuss it today because, as my right hon. Friend says, nothing should be taken off the table, and we should be constantly vigilant when it comes to new science and information.

Several nutrients are involved in the normal functioning of the immune system; however, there is currently insufficient evidence that taking vitamin D will mitigate

the effects of covid-19. In collaboration with Public Health England and the scientific advisory community on nutrition, NICE has published a rapid guideline on vitamin D in relation to covid-19, which my right hon. Friend mentioned. That data was reviewed by an expert panel and included the best available scientific advice published so far, including both randomised control trials and observational trials. That expert panel supported current Government advice, and the recommendation for everyone to take a 10 microgram vitamin D supplement throughout autumn and winter. However, it concluded that there is not currently enough evidence to support taking vitamin D in order to help, or treat, covid-19. There are still significant gaps in the current evidence, and studies to date have not reached the high level of data quality required to revise the guidance.

I heard what my right hon. Friend said about not wasting time, but as he mentioned, the Spanish study to which he alluded only included 76 participants. The smaller the sample group, the more challenging it can be to draw conclusions about the effect. We are also dealing with very poorly people, with multiple different factors affecting how they are responding and what they are responding to, so it is important to ensure that we can rely on that data. Indeed, there was a good double-blind trial before Christmas that showed no effect. However, there is a large-scale trial currently at Queen Mary University of London. I hope that it will give us some good clarity when it reports later in the year.

The current evidence base is mixed, and dominated by studies that are not always of great quality, with substantial concerns about bias and confounding. At the moment, they are unable to demonstrate that causal relationship between vitamin D and covid-19, because many risk factors for severe covid-19 outcomes are the same as for low vitamin D status. Due to the lack of reliable evidence, the NICE guideline recommends that more research is conducted. Government guidance continues to stress the use of high-quality randomised controlled trials in future studies. There are 70 trials under way in the UK and internationally, including some very high-quality ones that will answer key questions from NICE, Public Health England and the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition, and they are monitoring this new evidence. My right hon. Friend asked for my assurance that we are doing that, and I can give him that.

The long-standing Government advice is that, between October and early March, everyone should take a supplement containing 10 micrograms, or 400 international units, of vitamin D a day. Vitamin D helps to regulate the amount of calcium and phosphate in the body, and protects bone and muscle health. In April and autumn 2020, PHE reiterated its advice. It also ran a marketing campaign throughout December 2020. This had a specific focus on the communities mentioned by my right hon. Friend, in particular the BAME community, for whom vitamin D supplementation is very important. PHE advice to continue taking vitamin D supplements is important for those who are shielding, care home residents and prisoners, as well as for those who choose to cover most of their skin when outdoors. As he said, BAME individuals have a greater risk of not having high enough levels of vitamin D, and are advised to take a supplement all year round.

We are actively supporting the uptake of PHE's recommendations to ensure that those who need vitamin D supplementation receive it. The Government are providing a free four-month supply of 10 microgram vitamin D supplements to all adults on the clinically extremely vulnerable list, going far beyond care home residents who have opted in, residents in residential and nursing care homes in England, and the prison population; Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service have made supplements available across England and Wales. Through this commitment, this winter we have offered 2.7 million eligible people in England free vitamin D supplements, and to further drive uptake we have extended the registration period to 21 February so that even more people can benefit.

The Government have prioritised groups who were asked to stay indoors more than usual in the spring and summer due to national restrictions. In addition, recipients of the Healthy Start scheme are also offered access to vitamin supplements by the Government, and of course GPs and pharmacists may be approached for general advice on taking vitamin D. However, we do not expect this measure to place any additional burden on either

group, as they are under some pressure during the current pandemic. Guidance can be found online and we encourage individuals to buy 10 microgram vitamin D supplements, which are easily available from supermarkets, chemists, and health food shops.

We must keep looking at the evidence, and as research into the impact of vitamin D on covid-19 continues, we will continue to monitor it as it is published in real time. We have committed to keep this under review. PHE, the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition and NICE will update advice if and when necessary. Of course, I welcome any further studies into this emerging area.

I know my right hon. Friend wants us to move at pace. He embarks on everything he does with enthusiasm and vigour. However, I am sure he will agree that we are nudging along and some progress has been made. Future decisions should and must be based on robust evidence.

Question put and agreed to.

5.24 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 14 January 2021

CABINET OFFICE

Indemnity for Police Area Returning Officers and Local Returning Officers: 2021 Police and Crime

The Minister for the Constitution and Devolution (Chloe Smith): It is necessary for the Cabinet Office to indemnify police area returning officers (PAROs) and local returning officers (LROs) in England and Wales against uninsured claims that arise out of the conduct of their duties in police and crime commissioner (PCC) elections. This is because for the purposes of PCC elections, PAROs and LROs are statutorily independent officers and are separate from both central and local government. As such, they are personally liable for the conduct of the PCC elections. They are therefore potentially exposed to a variety of legal risks and challenges. Existing insurance that covers PAROs and LROs in discharging their statutory duties as returning officers at local elections will not, in most cases, cover them at the PCC election.

In the light of this, the Cabinet Office proposes to continue to indemnify PAROs and LROs at the forthcoming PCC elections on 6 May 2021, and any subsequent by-elections taking place before the next scheduled elections on 1 May 2024, against claims that arise out of the conduct of their duties where existing insurance cover does not apply. Where a PARO or LRO already holds insurance which covers liabilities incurred at the PCC election, they will be required to claim under that insurance (or to seek to claim under it) before making a claim against this indemnity. Insurance for specific elections has historically provided extremely poor value for money, with claims made under such cover being smaller than the cost of the insurance premium. An indemnity therefore provides better value for money and this approach has been taken for elections since 2009.

On this basis, I have today laid a minute setting out the Cabinet Office's intention to extend the current arrangements which indemnify PAROs and LROs against claims that arise out of the conduct of their duties in relation to the PCC elections.

In Wales, PAROs and LROs will be conducting Welsh parliamentary elections in combination with PCC elections on 6 May 2021. The Welsh Government will provide their own indemnity to returning officers working on the Welsh parliamentary polls. Where a claim is made against the actions or conduct of a returning officer in relation to both Welsh parliamentary and PCC elections, any losses, liability, damages, costs, claims, proceedings or expenses incurred in relation to the combined polls will be apportioned equally, so far as that is reasonable.

The indemnity will provide PAROs and LROs with cover for:

Amounts that exceed the upper limits on any existing insurance policies held by them, or local authorities on their behalf, that will provide coverage;

Any reasonable costs resulting from their liabilities to the public, as an employer or in their professional role.

The indemnity will only apply so far as any charges are not otherwise recoverable under the charges provisions contained in section 55 of the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011, and is subject to exclusions set out in the departmental minute. The indemnity is otherwise unlimited in terms of the maximum amount covered per claim.

We will also provide a certificate confirming that we will bear any employee liabilities of the PARO or LRO which would otherwise be covered by insurance procured under the Employers' Liability (Compulsory Insurance) Act 1969.

It is normal practice, when a Government Department proposes to undertake a contingent liability in excess of £300,000 for which there is no specific statutory authority, for the Minister concerned to present a departmental minute to Parliament giving particulars of the liability created and explaining the circumstances; and to refrain from incurring the liability until 14 parliamentary sitting days after the issue of the minute, except in cases of special urgency. The Treasury has approved the proposal in principle.

[HCWS706]

Indemnity for Returning Officers and Acting Returning Officers: UK Parliamentary Elections

The Minister for the Constitution and Devolution (Chloe Smith): It is necessary for the Cabinet Office to indemnify returning officers in England, Scotland and Wales against uninsured claims that arise out of the conduct of their duties in the course of a UK parliamentary election or by-election. This is because for purposes of UK parliamentary elections, returning officers and acting returning officers throughout Great Britain (referred to below as "ROs" and "AROs") are statutorily independent officers. They are separate from both central and local government. As a result, they are exposed to a variety of legal risks varying from minor claims for injury, to significant election petitions and associated legal costs.

ROs and AROs make their own arrangements to insure themselves against any risks they face in taking forward their statutory duties at local and UK parliamentary elections. The cover obtained usually forms part of the local authority's own insurance arrangements. While this insurance will cover certain risks to which ROs and AROs may be exposed at UK parliamentary elections, they could ultimately be liable for claims of a type not covered by insurance policies. They could also be liable for claims that exceed the insurance limits in existing cover.

In the light of this, the Cabinet Office proposes to continue to provide ROs and AROs with a specific indemnity for UK parliamentary elections to supplement the insurance policies that have been arranged locally. On this basis, I have today laid a minute setting out the Cabinet Office's intention to extend the current arrangements which indemnify ROs and AROs against claims that arise out of the conduct of their duties in relation to UK parliamentary elections.

The indemnity will cover ROs' and AROs' costs (including reasonable legal costs and reasonable expenses) incurred in connection with a UK parliamentary election, which arise in relation to their discharge of responsibilities

as RO or ARO but fall outside of the scope of the insurance cover which they have arranged locally, and where all other forms of recourse have been exhausted. The indemnity will be limited to the extent set out in the departmental minute.

The indemnity will cover costs arising in relation to UK parliamentary elections, including byelections, where the date of the poll is on or before 1 May 2024. The indemnity is subject to exceptions identified in the minute, but is unlimited in terms of the maximum amount it covers per claim. If the liability is called, provision for any payment is to be met from the Consolidated Fund.

It is normal practice, when a Government Department proposes to undertake a contingent liability in excess of £300,000 for which there is no specific statutory authority, for the Minister concerned to present a departmental minute to Parliament giving particulars of the liability created and explaining the circumstances; and to refrain from incurring the liability until 14 parliamentary sitting days after the issue of the minute, except in cases of special urgency. The Treasury has approved the proposal in principle.

[HCWS707]

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Domestic Abuse Victims: Workplace Support

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): I am tabling this statement for the benefit of hon. and right hon. Members, to bring to their attention the Government's report into support in the workplace for victims of domestic abuse.

This report, which I am publishing today, sets out the key findings from the review conducted by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy this year, as well as the areas of work which Government will take forward as a result of this review.

This review is part of the Government's agenda to raise awareness and build understanding about the devastating impact of domestic abuse on victims and their families. The landmark Domestic Abuse Bill, led by the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice, aims to ensure that victims have the confidence to come forward and report their experiences, safe in the knowledge that the state will do everything it can, both to support them and their children and to pursue the abuser. The Bill includes a wide range of measures to better protect and support victims of domestic abuse and their children for the long term.

Alongside the measures in the Bill, we know that accessing and remaining in work is vital for victims of domestic abuse. Work provides not only an income, and the security that brings, but also opportunities to make social connections, and maintain health and wellbeing. For individuals experiencing domestic abuse, the workplace itself can also be a place of safety and respite from the abuser, and a place where they can make the arrangements they need and contact specialist services.

To inform this report, BEIS launched a call for evidence in June seeking evidence of how workplaces can most effectively support victims of domestic abuse. This received 126 written responses from individuals, representatives of victims, employers and their representatives, trade unions and others with interest. We also held a series of roundtables and meetings to discuss the issues in more depth with the designate domestic abuse commissioner, the victims commissioner, trade unions, specialist charities and service providers, employers and their representatives across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

With the right support and encouragement, employers can play a key role in helping to lift the lid on this often hidden and always hideous crime. The report considers what pragmatic, effective new measures could be put in place in the workplace by Government and employers. It is structured around three main themes:

Raising awareness and understanding of the impacts that domestic abuse can have on individuals and employers.

Building and sharing best practice among employers.

The role that employment rights play in addressing the needs of victims of domestic abuse.

The work does not end with this report. We will work together with employers, representatives of victims and trade unions to continue to build awareness and understanding of domestic abuse and drive good practice across the board. The evidence provided showed that flexibility can help victims in situations where they need to access services. We will take forward the manifesto commitment to consult on ways to ensure that flexible working becomes the default for everyone, which we know will benefit individuals experiencing domestic abuse. We will also prepare a consultation on further steps to help victims of domestic abuse in the workplace, for example on how to support them to access existing employment rights such as flexible working more effectively.

I shall place copies of the report in the Libraries of the House.

[HCWS711]

TREASURY

Second-hand Margin Scheme in Northern Ireland: Motor Vehicles Sourced from Great Britain

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman): My noble Friend the Minister of State (Lord Agnew of Oulton) has today made the following written ministerial statement.

Under the Northern Ireland protocol ("the protocol"), EU VAT rules in respect of goods will continue to apply in Northern Ireland. However, Northern Ireland is, and will remain, part of the UK's VAT system.

As set out in the 10 December 2020 Command Paper [CP 346], the Government are aware of concerns regarding the use of the second-hand margin scheme in Northern Ireland, with respect to motor vehicles sourced in Great Britain. The Government understand the impact this may have on Northern Ireland traders and consumers, and are therefore exploring options to minimise this.

As an interim measure, the Government will be issuing guidance to traders on how they can continue to apply the margin scheme in relation to motor vehicles sold since the end of the transition period.

Following initial engagement this week, the Government will also seek to agree a long-term derogation with the European Commission from EU VAT rules to allow the margin scheme in Northern Ireland to apply in respect of motor vehicles sourced in Great Britain.

In line with this approach, the Government will bring forward legislation at the earliest opportunity on the use of the margin scheme in Northern Ireland with respect to motor vehicles sourced in Great Britain. Consistent with the Government's intentions to apply for a derogation, this legislation will be retrospective and apply from 11pm on 31 December 2020.

[HCWS710]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Reforming Pre-charge Bail

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): In February of last year, this Government launched a consultation seeking views on reforming pre-charge bail. A number of cases had highlighted that the existing system was not working for victims, law enforcement, or suspects. It is of great importance to this Government that the public have confidence in the criminal justice system, and I am clear that the welfare of victims should be at its heart.

The consultation sought views on a number of aspects of the pre-charge bail process—in particular addressing the reduced reliance on pre-charge bail, and the growing number of suspects being released under investigation (RUI). Under RUI, conditions and restrictions, which could be used to protect the victim, cannot be imposed on a suspect, and this has meant that in a number of cases victims have not had the right safeguards in place.

We received feedback from a range of stakeholders—from charities and victim services to lawyers and the judiciary and police—which we have used to inform our response. The Government have listened, and now we are taking action.

We will be bringing forward the following reforms, legislating where necessary at the earliest opportunity, to ensure victims can feel better protected and suspects will not be placed under endless suspicion.

We will remove the current presumption against use of pre-charge bail to ensure that law enforcement can take a balanced decision depending on the circumstances of the case. This will help reduce the numbers of those released under investigation (RUI).

We will adjust the timescales and authorisation levels for pre-charge bail to better reflect the operational realities faced by investigating officers, while maintaining rigorous oversight of decisions to extend bail timelines.

We will ensure that victims play a key role in the pre-charge bail process, that they are fully informed as the case progresses and are able to ask questions and provide views. This is so officers can take into account any safeguarding concerns to ensure appropriate measures are in place.

We are determined to give the police the right tools to keep the public safe. These changes are designed to make the pre-charge bail regime more effective and to provide more confidence for all involved.

Further detail of the changes we are making can be found in the consultation response. The consultation response will be available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/police-powers-pre-charge-bail>. A copy will also be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS708]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Contingencies Fund Advance

The Minister for Regional Growth and Local Government (Luke Hall): I give notice that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government intends to seek an advance from the Contingencies Fund to fund previously announced covid-19 expenditure on local government DEL that is above the level of the net cash requirement approved at the main estimate. The Department requires an advance of its cash requirement pending parliamentary approval of the supplementary estimate 2020-21.

Parliamentary approval for additional resources of £3,559,984,000 will be sought in a supplementary estimate for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £3,559,984,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

[HCWS712]

JUSTICE

Criminal Legal Aid: Independent Review

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Robert Buckland): Following the accelerated package of measures amending the criminal legal aid fee schemes announced in August, I announced that the next phase of the criminal legal aid review would involve an independently led review. On 21 December 2020, I published the terms of reference for that review, and announced via press notice that it would be chaired by Sir Christopher Bellamy QC. I am today following up that announcement.

The first phase of the criminal legal aid review has delivered up to £51 million to practitioners, and the independently led review will build on the data and insights collected so far. It will be far reaching in scope, assessing the criminal legal aid market in its entirety; the service being provided, how it is procured and how it is administered. It will develop and continue the original aims of the first phase of the criminal legal aid review.

Over the last few years, concerns have been raised about the long-term sustainability of criminal legal aid. Against this backdrop, and the impact of the covid-19 pandemic, it is important that we do what is necessary to ensure the criminal legal aid system is efficient, effective, and sustainable.

The ultimate objective for the criminal legal aid system is to provide legal advice and representation to those who need it, in line with my statutory duty to ensure legal aid is made available in order to ensure and uphold access to justice. This objective will provide the foundation for the review's analysis and recommendations. The review will aim to ensure that defendants receive high-quality advice and representation from a diverse set of practitioners, both now and in the future, while also making sure that the criminal legal aid system is sustainable and provides value for money to the taxpayer and contributes to the efficiency and effectiveness of the criminal justice system. The themes and objectives of the review are outlined in detail in the terms of reference, which I have placed in the Library of the House.

The review will be chaired by Sir Christopher Bellamy QC. Sir Christopher is a former judge with a wealth of legal experience. He has recently stepped down as chairman

of Linklaters global competition practice and joined Monckton Chambers to focus on mediation and arbitration. Sir Christopher will lead a dedicated review team within Government which will support him as he delivers the review's recommendations.

I am working to establish an expert advisory panel as soon as possible who will provide support to the review by testing and challenging the review's analysis and recommendations. The panel will be composed of individuals with a range of backgrounds, skills and experience that will aid the review in its analysis of the criminal legal aid system.

The review will report this year and the Ministry of Justice will aim to publish the report, alongside the Government's response, by the end of 2021.

[HCWS708]

Petitions

Thursday 14 January 2021

OBSERVATIONS

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Recognition of sub postmasters

The petition of residents of Linlithgow and East Falkirk,

Declares that sub postmasters and their staff carry out valuable work daily to support their local communities; further declares that they provide financial services that ensure the physical and psychological wellbeing of vulnerable people; and further declares that all sub postmasters should be commended for their efforts and their role should be preserved by a UK Government commitment to the Post Office network.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure the extension of the Post Office subsidy beyond 2021; and make a formal statement on the integral role that sub postmasters play in supporting their communities.

And the petitioners remain, etc—[Presented by *Martyn Day*, *Official Report*, 16 November 2020; Vol. 684, c. 138.]

[P002624]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully):

The Government value and recognise the key role that postmasters and their staff have continued to carry out during the pandemic. Postmasters and their staff have worked tirelessly to ensure post office services have continued to be available to communities across the country. These vital services have helped businesses capitalise on the growth of e-commerce and enabled people to keep in touch with loved ones, which has been especially important over the festive season.

The hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk will be reassured to hear that the 2020-21 Spending Review allocated £227 million to the post office network which will provide Post Office Ltd with funds to support post offices across the United Kingdom. This extends the £50 million network subsidy and provides Post Office Ltd with £177 million to invest in the future of the network.

The sustainability and future success of the post office network remain of the utmost importance to the Government. We will continue to make sure the Post Office maintains its focus on supporting postmasters to handle the ever-increasing challenges of operating during the pandemic.

Support for post offices

The petition of residents of Kilmarnock and Loudoun,

Declares that sub postmasters and their staff carry out valuable work daily to support their local communities; further declares that they provide financial services that ensure the physical and psychological wellbeing of vulnerable people; and further declares that all sub postmasters should be commended for their efforts and their role should be preserved by a UK Government commitment to the Post Office network.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure the extension of the Post Office subsidy beyond 2021; and make a formal statement on the integral role that sub postmasters play in supporting their communities.

And the petitioners remain, etc—[Presented by *Alan Brown*, *Official Report*, 25 November 2020; Vol. 684, c. 933.]

[P002630]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully):

The Government value and recognise the key role that postmasters and their staff have continued to carry out during the pandemic. Postmasters and their staff have worked tirelessly to ensure post office services have continued to be available to communities across the country. These vital services have helped businesses capitalise on the growth of e-commerce and enabled people to keep in touch with loved ones, which has been especially important over the festive season.

The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun will be reassured to hear that the 2020-21 Spending Review allocated £227 million to the post office network which will provide Post Office Ltd with funds to support post offices across the United Kingdom. This extends the £50 million network subsidy and provides Post Office Ltd with £177 million to invest in the future of the network.

The sustainability and future success of the post office network remain of the utmost importance to the Government. We will continue to make sure the Post Office maintains its focus on supporting postmasters to handle the ever-increasing challenges of operating during the pandemic.

ORAL ANSWERS

Thursday 14 January 2021

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
INTERNATIONAL TRADE	467	INTERNATIONAL TRADE—continued	
Brazil Trade Agreement: Environmental Standards.....	471	Free Trade Agreements: Small and Medium-sized Enterprises	468
Continuity Trade Agreements	472	Human Rights Clauses: Trade Agreements.....	480
Educational Technology: Exports	477	Inward Investment	473
Food and Drink Exports.....	469	Middle East: Trade.....	474
Free Trade Agreement: Australia	475	Scottish Goods: US Tariffs	467
Free Trade Agreements	474	Services: EU Relationship.....	477
Free Trade Agreements	475	Topical Questions	481
Free Trade Agreements	476	UK-EU Trade and Co-operation Agreement	478

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Thursday 14 January 2021

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY	23WS	HOME DEPARTMENT	25WS
Domestic Abuse Victims: Workplace Support.....	23WS	Reforming Pre-charge Bail	25WS
CABINET OFFICE	21WS	HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT	26WS
Indemnity for Police Area Returning Officers and Local Returning Officers: 2021 Police and Crime.....	21WS	Contingencies Fund Advance	26WS
Indemnity for Returning Officers and Acting Returning Officers: UK Parliamentary Elections	22WS	JUSTICE	26WS
		Criminal Legal Aid: Independent Review	26WS
		TREASURY	24WS
		Second-hand Margin Scheme in Northern Ireland: Motor Vehicles Sourced from Great Britain.....	24WS

PETITIONS

Thursday 14 January 2021

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY	7P	BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY—continued	
Recognition of sub postmasters	7P	Support for post offices.....	8P

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons,*

**not later than
Thursday 21 January 2021**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

CONTENTS

Thursday 14 January 2021

Speaker's Statement [Col. 467]

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 467] [see index inside back page]
Secretary of State for International Trade

EU Trade and Co-operation Agreement: Fishing Industry [Col. 487]
Answer to urgent question—(George Eustice)

Speaker's Statement [Col. 503]

Business of the House [Col. 504]
Statement—(Mr Rees-Mogg)

Domestic Abuse and Hidden Harms during Lockdown [Col. 524]
Statement—(Victoria Atkins)

Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Aid Beneficiaries [Col. 542]
Select Committee Statement—(Sarah Champion)

Backbench Business

Long Covid [Col. 549]

Covid-19: Dental Services [Col. 571]
General Debates

Vitamin D: Covid-19 [Col. 593]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Written Statements [Col. 21WS]

Petitions [Col. 7P]
Observations

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
