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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Monday 18 January 2021

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The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

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

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

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

The Secretary of State was asked—

Further and Higher Education: End of Transition Period

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the effect of the end of the transition period on (a) further and (b) higher education. [910834]

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the effect of the end of the transition period on (a) further and (b) higher education. [910859]

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson): We have worked with the sector on the steps it needed to take following the transition period. This included questions around participation in European Union programmes, migration and student support arrangements. We are replacing the European social fund via the UK shared prosperity fund and introducing the new Turing scheme.

Patricia Gibson [V]: Before Brexit, EU students contributed £1.2 billion to the UK economy annually, boosting the profile of UK universities globally and helping to support the pipeline of talented science, technology, engineering and mathematics graduates and medical graduates. With the reality of excessively high international student fees, many EU students will choose to study elsewhere, so how will the Secretary of State ensure that the Turing scheme, a poor replacement for Erasmus, is as effective in encouraging inward student mobility?

Gavin Williamson: The Turing scheme is not a poor replacement, but a brilliant replacement for Erasmus. It is about us looking around the globe to see how we can expand opportunities for students. Yes, there are many, many brilliant higher education student institutes right across Europe, but there are so many more right across the world, whether in the United States or Canada, whether in India or China or whether in Australia and so many other places. That is what we are going to be giving young people the opportunity to release, and they will have the opportunity to go and study there as well.

David Linden [V]: Under the Horizon 2020 programme, the UK consistently received more money out than it put in. Under the terms of this agreement, the UK is set to receive no more than it contributes. While universities in Scotland were relieved to see a commitment to Horizon Europe in the joint agreement, what additional funding will the Secretary of State make available to ensure that our overall level of research funding is maintained?

Gavin Williamson: As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, the Government have been very clear in our commitment to research. The Prime Minister has stated time and time again that our investment in research is absolutely there, ensuring that we deliver Britain as a global scientific superpower. That is why more money has been going into research, and universities will continue to play an incredibly important role in that, but as he will be aware, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy manages the research element that goes into the funding of universities.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab) [V]: The anxiety caused by the lack of answers on the impact of the end of transition upon students is only adding to the anxiety that they already feel because of the impact that covid-19 has had on their educational experience, their finances and their graduate job prospects, which is all made worse by the fact that students do not feel that their voice is being heard by Government. Perhaps the greatest injustice of all, they feel, is being made to pay rent for accommodation that the Secretary of State has mandated they should not use. What is he going to do to right this wrong?

Gavin Williamson: As the hon. Lady will know, before Christmas we set out plans to support youngsters who were going to be facing the greatest hardship. We continue to keep this under review, and we will continue to work with the sector to provide the best support to students up and down the land.

Covid-19: Remote Education

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to ensure the adequacy of remote education for children during the covid-19 lockdown. [910835]

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to ensure the adequacy of remote education for children during the covid-19 lockdown. [910853]

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to ensure the adequacy of remote education for children during the covid-19 lockdown. [910860]

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson): Teachers and leaders are working incredibly hard, making tremendous efforts to provide and to improve their high-quality remote education. We have set clear strengthened expectations for schools and further education providers, and our “Get help with remote education” page on gov.uk provides a range of support, training and good practice for schools and parents to look at.

Danny Kruger [V]: All schools are under huge pressure, delivering teaching both in class and online at the same time, and many are doing an absolutely fantastic job. However, some parents are naturally worried that their children are not getting as much direct live teaching as pupils at other schools they have heard about, and they have a right to understand why. Does my right hon. Friend agree that parents should challenge their school directly and discuss their concerns with the head of the governing body and that making a complaint to Ofsted, as Ministers have suggested they do, should only be the last resort?

Gavin Williamson: Absolutely. We have always been clear—and I stated this to the House just a couple of weeks ago—that we encourage parents, in the first instance, to speak with a teacher or headteacher, and only as a last resort to go to Ofsted. We want to see and encourage as much live teaching as possible, which is shown to be the best way of delivering teaching, but a whole spectrum of resources can be offered. It is really important to work with schools, with parents supporting those schools, to ensure that we get the best solutions for all our children.

Jerome Mayhew [V]: I know from my experience with my own children that having live lessons taught online is much more effective than simply placing learning resources online. With more than 750,000 laptops already delivered and 2.9 million laptops already available in schools for the use of children, the digital divide has been substantially overcome. With that in mind, can my right hon. Friend give an indication of the percentage of schools providing live teaching online? Does he have plans to increase that further?

Gavin Williamson: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the great strides that have been made in supporting schools, and in schools supporting parents, on the provision of remote education. We obviously encourage schools to put on as much live provision as possible, which is very beneficial, and we are working with the whole school and further education sector to support them with that request. We are seeing substantial gains, and we are monitoring the situation closely, as is Ofsted.

Tom Hunt: I thank all the teachers in Ipswich, many of whom are balancing still teaching some kids physically and teaching some remotely. On the theme of live learning, does the Secretary of State consider the impact on those with special educational needs? For them, live lessons are particularly important, especially if they have speech and language difficulties, because live engagement gives them the opportunity to question and is very valuable. Live lessons can also be hugely beneficial for the mental health of many pupils, because even if it is just a couple of hours a day, they have that live engagement, and they see other pupils and their teacher.

Gavin Williamson: As always, my hon. Friend hits the nail on the head: it is so important to ensure that we get the right balance for young people, especially those with special educational needs. That is why we took the decision to ensure that children who have an education, health and care plan are able to go into school, as part of the category of vulnerable children who may need extra face-to-face support from their teachers.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): The fact is that up to 1.8 million children in this country do not have access to a device at home, and more than 800,000 do not have the access to the internet that is needed. Even with the laptops that the Secretary of State has already provided and those he intends to provide, the provision of devices and dongles falls well short. Why is the Secretary of State willing to accept standards for other people's children that he would never accept for his own, and why is it that, once again, the incompetence of his Department has left children across the country seriously disadvantaged?

Gavin Williamson: At every stage, we on the Government Benches—and, I am sure, those on the Opposition Benches—want to deliver the very best for every single child, wherever they live and whatever background they come from. The hon. Gentleman may want to play politics over children's lives, but we are focused on delivering for those children. That is why, on top of the stock of 2.9 million laptops and tablets that are already out there, we took the decision to invest £400 million in purchasing and distributing an additional 1.3 million devices, making a total of 4.2 million devices in the school system.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP) [V]: Of course, a laptop or a device is really just a glorified typewriter if you cannot access the internet. We know that nearly 1 million youngsters in the UK are in that situation. Given that BT's offer of free internet access was rejected by the Secretary of State, how does he plan to help such children to access the internet for remote education?

Gavin Williamson: At every stage, we work with many companies, including EE, Three and BT, to ensure that we maximise the amount of data that is available for those children who are most vulnerable. The hon. Lady will be pleased that many children in Scotland are able to benefit from the work we have been doing with those providers. I imagine that she will be keen to pass on her thanks and appreciation for that work, which has been undertaken to the benefit of all children in the United Kingdom.

Carol Monaghan: Of course, I welcome the support that these internet companies have provided; I only wish the Secretary of State would take his responsibility in this area more seriously, and had moved more quickly. The success of remote learning is not just about the right equipment. It is also about youngsters' readiness to learn, and that includes whether or not they have eaten. The Scottish Government are ensuring that no child is left hungry during remote learning by ensuring either a cash-first response or vouchers, depending on the preference of the family. Having seen the meagre offerings in these free school meals from some private providers in England, will the UK Government make a similar commitment, and provide either cash or voucher support to the families who are entitled to free school meals?

Gavin Williamson: As the hon. Lady is probably aware, we have opened up the national voucher scheme to all schools in England. We give those schools the option of providing food parcels or locally procured vouchers,

or of making use of the national voucher scheme. This is a broad range of options for schools, enabling them to ensure that all children are fed, which I believe is both her priority and mine.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con) [V]: The Department for Education's own pre-pandemic study found that pupils' wellbeing predicted their later academic progression. Children with better mental health and wellbeing at age seven had a value-added key stage 2 score 2.46 points higher—equivalent to more than one term's progress—than pupils with poorer wellbeing and mental health. While schools are closed and children are remote learning, mental health worries for millions of children have rocketed, as highlighted by the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health and others. Will my right hon Friend work with charities such as Place2Be to put mental health councillors in all schools now, so that children can access support whenever they need it and their attainment levels will not suffer even further?

Gavin Williamson: I know that my right hon. Friend speaks for many in the House who have particular concerns about children's mental health, and about making sure that, as we work through this pandemic, this is not something that is forgotten and on which no action is taken. We have already undertaken work on helping schools to train staff to support not just pupils, but staff. I would be very happy to sit down with my right hon. Friend to discuss the work that many charities and voluntary organisations undertake, and how they can properly and fully support all children and all those who work in the education sector when it comes to their mental health.

Early Years Providers: Financial Stability

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure the financial stability of early years providers during the covid-19 outbreak. [910836]

Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure the financial stability of early years providers during the covid-19 outbreak. [910837]

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure the financial stability of early years providers during the covid-19 outbreak. [910838]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Vicky Ford): We have given unprecedented support to early years throughout the pandemic, through block-buying childcare places, and through the furlough and other schemes. We are monitoring the situation very closely, and are keeping under constant review whether further action is needed. To support providers further, we have issued additional advice to make it clear that children who are temporarily absent from nurseries can be counted in this week's census, even if they are ill or if their parents are worried about covid.

Stephen Morgan [V]: Nurseries and childcare providers in deprived areas are most likely to close, which is catastrophic for disadvantaged children. Coronavirus presents a significant threat to early years providers in Portsmouth, with many already struggling financially.

What action will the Minister take to ensure we do not lose essential childcare places in less well-off communities as a result of the pandemic?

Vicky Ford: As I have said, we have given unprecedented support to the early years sector. It does an amazing job, and we are keeping the question of whether any further action is needed under constant review. The advice that we gave last week is really important, because this week is the annual census week, and it is really important that those providers know that they can count children who are temporarily absent, provided they remain open for them. That is really important advice to our early years providers.

Kate Osborne [V]: With so many staff in early years settings having to isolate, it is becoming increasingly difficult to open the maintained nursery schools in my constituency, as they do not have surplus staff to rely on. What funding will be made available to mitigate that, so that support staff can be employed to cover staff who are shielding or self-isolating?

Vicky Ford: We are taking two actions urgently to support our early years. The first is the roll-out of asymptomatic testing for staff. Asymptomatic testing went live through the community testing system last week, and I have written to local authorities to ensure that early years staff are prioritised in their community testing. Secondly, if maintained nursery schools and, indeed, other private providers have a staff shortage that means they need to close temporarily, they can still count those children for this week's census—just as they can in any year if they have a temporary closure due to, for example, a flood. They can still count those children, provided the closure is only temporary.

Karl Turner [V]: Many children's nurseries in east Hull face severe financial difficulty from years of underfunding, and from exclusion from support during this pandemic. The Minister knows that childcare providers in disadvantaged areas such as east Hull are the most likely to close, and that that would be catastrophic for many young children, whose life chances are shaped by early education. Can she guarantee that we will not lose essential childcare places in less well-off areas such as east Hull as a result of covid-19?

Vicky Ford: We have already announced in the spending review that we will put additional funding into early years entitlements in the next financial year. That will allow us to increase the hourly funding rates for all local authorities by at least 8p an hour for two-year-olds, and by 6p an hour for three and four-year-olds; of course, those in areas of higher disadvantage get higher amounts of money. That will pay for a rate increase that is higher than the cost nurseries may face from the uplift to the national living wage in April.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab) [V]: Ministers are telling everyone to stay at home, yet early years providers are being told to stay open for as many children as possible or lose funding. This month's funding changes mean that nurseries, pre-schools and childminders will be punished financially for having lower demand than usual, or for limiting their opening during lockdown, and 19,000 providers could close by summer as a result. Is that a price the Minister is willing to pay, or does she think those warning about this are wrong?

Vicky Ford: As the Opposition spokesperson knows very well, because I called her last week, we are providing that advice to settings to ensure that it is very clear that if parents are keeping their children at home because they are concerned about covid, settings can still count those children for the census, provided they are open. If they choose to close, they can furlough their staff using the other Government schemes. We will continue to monitor the situation very closely to see whether further support is needed.

Early Years Settings: Educational Development

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the educational development of children in early years settings during the covid-19 outbreak. [910839]

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the educational development of children in early years settings during the covid-19 outbreak. [910852]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Vicky Ford): The early years are a crucial period for a child's development, and early years education cannot be delivered online. That is why, in June last year, the Government prioritised getting children back to nurseries and childminders. Given the negative impact of children missing education, Public Health England's advice that the early years sector is a less significant driver of community transmission, and the low rates of infection among the very young, we advise that early years settings should remain open to all children, and we are working with early years organisations to ensure that no young child gets left behind.

Nickie Aiken [V]: I am proud to support and be a member of the early years healthy development review, chaired by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom). We will share our recommendations in February. The review team has found, from discussions with early years professionals, that family hubs play a vital role in ensuring that every infant gets the best start in life, and that includes their educational development. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Vicky Ford: I so agree with my hon. Friend. That is why we are setting up a national centre for family hubs. There are already many family hubs across the country providing a wide range of integrated services, including support for families in the early years. I visited the family hub in Westminster in her constituency to see the difference it makes to families. We want to ensure that successful approaches, such as that in Westminster, can be spread across the country.

Jack Brereton [V]: As a father with a son in nursery, I know just how important it is to keep early years open for all children. I thank the Government for doing so, and thank all our schools and early years providers across Stoke-on-Trent for everything they are doing to stay open for those eligible. Given the impact on children who are currently unable to attend school, and their

families, will my hon. Friend outline what action will be taken to ensure those children catch up quickly when schools can fully reopen?

Vicky Ford: We have committed to a £1 billion catch-up package, which is a universal £650 million catch-up premium, and the £350 million national tutoring programme to support the most disadvantaged pupils. We expect providers to prioritise support for pupils by individual need. The Education Endowment Foundation has published guidance to support catch-up. To help the very youngest children to catch up, we are delivering the Nuffield Early Language Intervention in reception year. Some 40% of primary schools have signed up for the programme. These programmes will help many children in Stoke and across the country.

Remote Learning: Laptops and Other Devices

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): What assessment his Department has made of the effectiveness of the roll-out of (a) laptops and (b) other devices to disadvantaged pupils to support remote learning during the covid-19 outbreak. [910840]

Rob Roberts (Delyn) (Con): What assessment his Department has made of the effectiveness of the roll-out of (a) laptops and (b) other devices to disadvantaged pupils to support remote learning during the covid-19 outbreak. [910855]

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the availability of (a) devices and (b) access to broadband for school and college pupils working from home during the covid-19 outbreak. [910857]

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): What assessment his Department has made of the effectiveness of the roll-out of (a) laptops and (b) other devices to disadvantaged pupils to support remote learning during the covid-19 outbreak. [910863]

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson): We are investing over £400 million to support access to remote education, including by providing 1.3 million laptops and tablets to disadvantaged children. We are partnering with the UK's leading mobile operators to provide free data, as well as deliver 4G wireless routers for pupils without a connection at home.

Paul Howell [V]: Wingate Community Nursery School in my Sedgefield constituency has continued to provide excellent early years education to its students throughout the covid-19 pandemic. As a result of the change to the early years education funding process, which will see nurseries receive funding per hour if a student is in attendance, and with many parents struggling with the decision of whether to send their children to nursery, Wingate nursery may find itself financially worse off. Will the Secretary of State look again at the changes to the funding process and confirm that they will not have a negative impact on nurseries financially?

Gavin Williamson: I would very much like to join my hon. Friend in thanking the staff at Wingate for all the work they do to support children, including in these incredibly difficult times. He is right to point out how

we proceeded with the funding mechanism prior to Christmas. Obviously, in the light of the changing course of the pandemic, we had to make revisions to ensure that nurseries such as Wingate across the country get the support they need. That is why we have changed the approach to the census being carried out this week.

Rob Roberts: The Welsh Government, which is led by Labour with a Liberal Democrat Education Minister, have presided over an 8.4% real-terms reduction in education spending in the past 10 years. Last week, my office identified that dozens of the most deprived households in my constituency still do not have access to suitable devices for learning remotely. What advice can my right hon. Friend give me on assisting the young learners in my constituency, who are being let down once again by the Welsh Government?

Gavin Williamson: Of course, we will always want to work very closely with all the devolved Administrations, sharing good practice and good ideas across the board. I understand that the Welsh Government are still sitting on £1 billion-worth of covid funding provided to them by the UK Government. We would ensure that that was not sat in their coffers, but was spent wisely to support children in my hon. Friend's constituency and right across Wales.

Daniel Zeichner [V]: In the city of Cambridge last week, 1,748 children were without a suitable device for learning. Across the county as a whole, almost 6,500 were. Ministers have had almost a year to sort this out. When will every child have access to the learning they need?

Gavin Williamson: I point the hon. Gentleman to an answer I gave earlier. Over 2.9 million devices are already in circulation within the school system. That has been supplemented by an additional 1.3 million, of which 750,000 have already been dispatched. Over the last two weeks, we have been seeing the dispatch of devices to schools running at approximately 20,000 each day.

Bob Seely [V]: I thank Ministers and education officers for their work, and most of all, I thank teachers on the Isle of Wight for keeping education going in these very difficult circumstances; I am sure that the Secretary of State would want to do so as well. Can he explain what further support is being planned for children in need on the Island and what is being done to ensure adequate virtual learning across all schools?

Gavin Williamson: I join my hon. Friend in thanking teachers and support staff on the Isle of Wight for their work over the last few months and for their continued work and efforts to ensure that every child on the Isle of Wight gets the very best education. We have already announced the increase in the number of devices that we are procuring—increasing that from the initial 200,000 that we announced a number of months ago to 1.3 million; this is very much there to complement the offer—and we have set out explicitly the expectations that we have of all schools and colleges in terms of the provision of remote education in these truly unprecedented times.

Technical and Vocational Exams

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): What steps he is taking to support students (a) preparing for and (b) taking vocational exams during the covid-19 outbreak. [910842]

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support students to sit their (a) technical and (b) vocational exams in 2021. [910856]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan): Students due to undergo assessments in 2020-21 deserve the opportunity to progress successfully on to the next stage of their lives. That is why, alongside Ofqual, the Government are currently consulting on the alternative arrangements needed for vocational and technical examinations due to take place from April onwards. In the meantime, we are investing over £400 million to support access to remote education and, having already delivered 700,000 laptops and tablets to schools up and down the country, we are now rolling out the programme to 16 to 19 year-olds in colleges. The majority of FE providers will be invited to order their devices by the end of January.

Andrew Rosindell [V]: As my hon. Friend will know, schools and colleges—for instance, Havering college in my constituency—were asked to make their own decisions about whether or not students should sit vocational exams in January, meaning that some exams went ahead while others were cancelled. What measures are the Government taking to ensure that students will not be unfairly disadvantaged, whether they were able to sit their exams or not?

Gillian Keegan: I thank my hon. Friend for his question because it gives me the opportunity to make one thing absolutely clear to the House: no student will be disadvantaged by their decision either to sit their January assessment or to defer it. That means that, for those learners requiring a licence to practise, which can be fulfilled only through practical assessment, that assessment can go ahead, and, indeed, many did. Launched on Friday, Ofqual's consultation is seeking views on what the alternative arrangements should be and how those alternative arrangements will ensure fairness for all learners and give everybody the opportunity to progress on to their next stage.

Peter Aldous [V]: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for those replies. It is very important that the students and apprentices taking technical and vocational exams are not overlooked. Will she assure the House that the work of making alternative arrangements for them will be given a high priority and the necessary resources; that these arrangements will be conveyed quickly; that priority will be given to returning to buildings when on-site assessments are a key part of a course; and that exam support services will be available to colleges as well as to schools?

Gillian Keegan: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct, and I could not agree more about the importance of ensuring that vocational and technical qualification students are treated fairly and not disadvantaged compared with their peers. We have been working at pace with

Ofqual to ensure appropriate arrangements are in place specifically for vocational and technical qualification learners, and the joint consultation we published on Friday seeks views specifically on those qualifications. As soon as possible, we will prioritise safe attendance for those students who need to attend on site in order to prepare for practical assessments, where it is impossible for that training to take place remotely. I can confirm that the exam support service is indeed available to colleges as well as schools.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I pay tribute to everyone in the further education sector, and particularly those college leaders who have been left with very difficult decisions to make this January because of the BTEC exam fiasco. The Government's farcical approach to those exams has left college leaders to show leadership and concern for pupil and teacher safety, in the absence of any from the Government. As the question from the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) has just exposed, we now have students and colleges on different tracks to the same exams. It is all so unnecessary. How many more vocational students must suffer as a result of the Secretary of State's inability to make the right decisions at the right time?

Gillian Keegan: I associate myself with the hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to everyone in the further education sector. They have done an amazing job in keeping learning going, whether remotely—they have been absolutely outstanding in that area—or by preparing colleges to take students.

Learners up and down the country have faced unprecedented challenges this year. For those who have worked so hard over recent months preparing for their January exams, particularly those who require a practical licence to practise, it is right that we allow them the opportunity to progress, because no alternative arrangements are capable of being put in place for those types of exams. Schools and colleges are best placed to know whether they are in a position to deliver the January exams and what mix of students they have, which is why in the light of rapidly evolving public health advice, we took the decision to give them the final say on whether proceeding with January exams was right for their learners. I am sure the hon. Gentleman, and indeed the whole House, will join me in wishing those learners all the very best for their results.

Covid-19: Additional Costs to Schools

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): What financial support his Department is providing to schools to fund additional costs relating to the covid-19 outbreak. [910843]

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): Some £102 million of funding for exceptional covid-related costs incurred by schools in the first lockdown period of March to July 2020 has already been distributed to schools, and for November and December, schools under financial pressure that have exceptional additional staffing costs due to covid-related absences have been able to claim from the covid workforce fund.

Munira Wilson [V]: I am grateful to the Minister for his response. He is aware from our discussions that many Twickenham schools have incurred significant

one-off and ongoing costs to become covid secure that they have not been able to reclaim, at the same time as losing tens of thousands of pounds from lettings and fundraising. Many of them do not have significant cash reserves to rely on, nor does the council have the money to bail them out, so if schools are to reopen fully and safely as soon as possible, could the Minister please advise which staff and activities he thinks are expendable so that they can make ends meet?

Nick Gibb: The hon. Member will be aware that we secured a three-year funding settlement for schools, with a 4% increase in funding for the next financial year, and we have also secured for this year a £1 billion catch-up fund and the covid workforce fund. If a school is genuinely in financial difficulties, it should talk to the local authority if it is a maintained school, or to the Education and Skills Funding Agency if it is an academy.

Covid-19 Lockdown: Safety of Staff

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help ensure the safety of staff at (a) early years settings, (b) special schools and (c) alternative provision during the covid-19 lockdown announced in January 2021. [910844]

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help ensure the safety of staff at (a) early years settings, (b) special schools and (c) alternative provision during the covid-19 lockdown announced in January 2021. [910854]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Vicky Ford): Ensuring the safety of children, the workforce and families is our overriding priority. The early years and schools workforce are classed as essential workers for the purposes of accessing testing, and we continue to update our guidance to help specific settings provide a safe and secure environment for children and staff.

Clive Lewis [V]: The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency has contradicted the Government by saying that it has not authorised the use of 30-minute lateral flow tests to allow students to remain in classrooms instead of sending whole groups or bubbles home. Will the Minister confirm that no tests are being done on our children that have not met with regulatory approval, and will the Government commit to putting the health and safety of children first, instead of the PM's deregulatory ideology that is turning our schools into experimentation labs for big pharma?

Vicky Ford: We have added NHS Test and Trace and Public Health England, and we have asked them to provide rapid updated public health advice on daily contact covid testing in schools. This is in the context of the current prevalence of the virus and the high transmission rates. The Department, NHS Test and Trace and Public Health England encourage the weekly testing of all staff, although this remains a voluntary matter for individual staff members. As I said earlier, early years staff will be prioritised through community testing.

Sarah Jones [V]: Last week, I was contacted by the inspirational headteacher of Tunstall Nursery School in my constituency. She and her team have worked so

hard to ensure that vital education is provided to kids as safely as possible, but she contacted me to express urgent concern over the safety of her pupils and staff because of covid-19. Other nurseries and special schools in my constituency have contacted me with the same concern. Does the Minister agree that this situation is unacceptable and that, at the very least, they deserve to see the clear detailed scientific evidence and advice that the Government have received about the safety of early years settings? Why have we still not seen that?

Vicky Ford: All the advice that we have been given has been made public. There are three reasons why we have kept early years settings open and they are all important. Early education gives the child communication and social skills that set them up for life. You cannot teach a small child online, and they cannot get those months back. Our public health advice remains that younger children play a lower role in community transmission, and the evidence at the moment is that the number of confirmed cases of covid among the very youngest children is the lowest in any age group.

Nursery School Funding

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): If he will increase funding for nursery schools to meet costs resulting from the covid-19 outbreak. [910845]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Vicky Ford): We have already increased the hourly funding rates for local authorities for the next financial year, and this will pay for a rate increase that is higher than the cost that nurseries may face from the uplift for the national living wage in April. We are also increasing the minimum funding floor. We have provided further advice on how the census will work this year, and we are continuing to monitor the situation closely.

Grahame Morris [V]: Maintained nursery schools in my constituency not only provide first-class early education but support many working families with childcare, yet many are facing huge financial pressures because of the pandemic, because they are not able to access the same support as schools and businesses. When will the Government live up to their promise of giving them a long-term future by guaranteeing their funding?

Vicky Ford: Maintained nursery schools are a really important part of the early years environment. We give them extra supplemental funding, and we have already announced that we will be giving them the supplemental funding for the next financial year. Obviously, this was a three-year spending review process, so I cannot go further than this financial year, but they will also get the other benefits from the uplift that we are doing for the Government-paid entitlements for two, three and four-year-olds on top of that. I would like to thank all the maintained nursery schools and early years providers in the hon. Gentleman's constituency.

International Baccalaureate Examinations

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): What arrangements his Department has made for examinations in 2021 for international baccalaureate students. [910847]

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): Although exams are the fairest way of assessing what a student knows, it is no longer viable for exams to go ahead as planned, so international baccalaureate students should be subject to a similar approach to GCSEs and A-levels. Working with Ofqual, we are consulting on alternative arrangements for fairly awarding grades in qualifications, including the IB, when exams do not take place, so that students can progress to the next stage of their lives.

Gareth Johnson [V]: Some of the schools in my constituency elect to take the IB examinations rather than A-levels. No final decision has yet been taken as to whether those exams will take place this spring, so will my right hon. Friend commit to assisting these schools, so that no child who takes the IB exam will be disadvantaged compared with those who are due to take A-levels?

Nick Gibb: I am aware of some excellent schools in my hon. Friend's constituency, particularly Dartford Grammar School, under the excellent headteacher, Mr Oakes, that do offer the IB. The joint consultation document that we published on Friday says that

"it is the Department's policy position that external exams for many vocational, technical and other general qualifications should not take place as planned."

It goes on to say:

"For other general qualifications that are not GCSEs...or A levels, such as...the International Baccalaureate, the awarding approach should be similar to GCSEs, AS and A levels".

In other words, we are talking about teacher-assessed grades but with the evidence base and checks and balances, as set out in the consultation document.

Secondary Schools: Refurbishment and Rebuilding

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): What plans he has to introduce a school refurbishment and rebuilding programme for secondary schools. [910850]

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): The Prime Minister announced a new 10-year school rebuilding programme, which will transform education for thousands of pupils. It was launched with a commitment to 50 new school building projects a year, targeted at school buildings in the worst condition. We have also committed £1.8 billion next year to improve the condition of school buildings.

Christian Matheson: Upton-by-Chester High School in my constituency is a good school with an outstanding sixth form, but its buildings are not fit for purpose. What would the Minister advise me and the school leadership that they need to do to make sure they catch his eye in future programmes? Will he come to Upton, as soon as he is allowed, to visit the school?

Nick Gibb: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that since 2015 we have allocated £9.5 billion to maintaining and improving school buildings. In addition, the priority school building programme is rebuilding or refurbishing buildings in the worst condition at more than 500 schools. I would be delighted to discuss with him Upton-by-Chester High School, which has a very high EBacc entry figure of 60%. It is a good school and I congratulate its headteacher, Mr Cummins, on what he has achieved.

Topical Questions

[910894] **Suzanne Webb** (Stourbridge) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson): I very much wish to start by thanking all those who work in our schools, colleges, early years settings and universities for the work they have been doing over the past few weeks to ensure that youngsters and people of all ages who are using our education establishment get the very best education. In the light of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, we have confirmed that GCSE, A-level and AS-level exams will not be going ahead as planned this summer. This year's grades will be based on the judgment of teachers, not algorithms. I am pleased to confirm that Ofqual, with the Department, has launched a two-week consultation to seek views on how to fairly award all pupils, including private candidates and students taking vocational qualifications, the grades they truly deserve.

Suzanne Webb [V]: May I, too, start by thanking all teachers and educational staff in Stourbridge, who continue to do a vital job in the most difficult of circumstances? Although we are asking the vast majority of schools to move to remote provision, does my right hon. Friend agree that it is only right that we, once again, keep schools open for vulnerable children and those whose parents are working on the frontline of our response to this pandemic?

Gavin Williamson: I very much join my hon. Friend and neighbour in thanking all those teachers and support staff who have been doing a brilliant job in Stourbridge in keeping schools open for children of critical workers and for vulnerable children. It is important to emphasise the need to encourage children, especially those in the most vulnerable categories, to come into school and continue to have that support and protection that school offers them, and the importance of doing so—it gives them so much support, in sometimes difficult circumstances. I thank all teaching staff for ensuring that schools remain open for children of critical workers.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): The utterly inadequate school food parcels we saw last week were an absolute scandal, one that was, however, entirely in line with the Government's own guidance. So why has it taken the Secretary of State until the third week of term to initiate a voucher system? Can he tell the House how many parents received vouchers today?

Gavin Williamson: As the hon. Lady would know if she had taken the time to read our guidance, those food parcels did not meet the expectations or the guidance that we set out. They are not acceptable and we have made that clear. We are very keen to ensure that schools have the choice and freedom to choose what is best for children in their school. That is why we have given schools—*[Interruption.]* If the hon. Lady stopped chuntering from a sedentary position she would have the opportunity to hear my answer. That is why we have given schools the opportunity to choose food parcels, vouchers that are locally procured or the national voucher scheme. More than 15,000 of those vouchers have already been dispatched today.

Kate Green: Ah, so we got the answer in the end. The truth is that the Secretary of State was late in planning the voucher scheme, late in getting laptops to students, late in consulting on replacing exams, and late in announcing that students will not return to school in January. After delay after delay, has he finally realised what parents, pupils and staff have known for months, which is that he is just not up to the job?

Gavin Williamson: Time and again, we have recognised where there are real challenges in dealing with the global pandemic. That is why we have taken the action that we have. That is why we are distributing 1.3 million laptops right across the country.

That is why we have put the national voucher scheme in place. That is why we are supporting families who are often the most vulnerable and why we will continue supporting families who are the most vulnerable.

[910897] **Christian Wakeford** (Bury South) (Con): I wish to start by putting on the record my thank you to all those early years and nursery workers in Radcliffe, Whitefield and Prestwich in my constituency. During the pandemic, private nurseries have seen their cleaning costs and the costs of PPE increase fourfold, but, as they are not state run, they get no assistance with those increased costs. Will the Minister meet me to discuss a funding solution that will address this immediate concern while also working towards a meaningful review of early years funding?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Vicky Ford): We have provided unprecedented support to the early years sector throughout the pandemic, through the block-buying childcare places, furlough and other schemes. We are monitoring the current situation really closely and will continue to review it if further measures are needed. For example, where education and childcare settings have an unmet need for PPE, they can access it via their local authority or local resilience forums. We will continue to keep supporting our early years sector.

[910895] **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab) [V]: As Ministers know, both the Children's Commissioner and I are keen to get their support for a ban on placing looked-after children in unregulated accommodation, but I understand that the Department wants to do this only for under-16s, which would currently affect 90 or so children. There are many, many more 16 to 18-year-olds in unsafe accommodation who are still legally children and who are still meant to be in our care. Can the Minister explain the justification for treating them differently and, in doing so, potentially putting them at risk of harm?

Vicky Ford: Independent and semi-independent provision can be the right choice for older children who are ready for this where it is high quality and meets their needs. It can enable them to develop their independence as they transition into adult life. However, we are absolutely clear that we need to do more to ensure that the quality of this provision is consistently good, and that this type of provision is simply not appropriate for children under the age of 16 who should be placed in children's homes or foster care. We have consulted on introducing national quality standards and we will publish the Government's response to the consultation in due course.

[910899] **Mrs Pauline Latham** (Mid Derbyshire) (Con) [V]: I am sure that, like me, my hon. Friend has received a lot of ill-informed and abusive emails and posts on social media about the school lunches. I am pleased that the Department has established a hotline for complaints about the lunch parcels. I am absolutely certain that most schools are providing good-quality parcels for children. Please will she confirm how many complaints about food parcels the newly established hotline has received?

Vicky Ford: DFE helplines have been giving support to schools and others on a wide range of matters. On Wednesday morning, after seeing some of the photos of unacceptable parcels, we announced that parents could call the DFE if they had a problem with a lunch parcel, but that they should try to resolve it with the school first. There are around 1.4 million children on free school meals. By the end of last week, we had received a total of seven calls in relation to unacceptable lunch parcels. Each has been fully investigated. We expect high-quality lunch parcels for our children.

[910896] **Judith Cummins** (Bradford South) (Lab) [V]: Ninety primary school headteachers from across Bradford have written to the Secretary of State to express their disappointment in his ability to support teachers and pupils. School-age children in my constituency have some of the lowest social mobility rates in the country. The Government say that they have a plan to ensure that children catch up on the learning that they have lost, but there are currently only enough places on the national tutoring programme for one in every five disadvantaged pupils in England. Will the Minister increase this as a matter of urgency, and commit to publishing a fully funded plan to ensure that the most disadvantaged children do not fall even further behind?

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): Ensuring that no child suffers a loss to their education or damage to their long-term prospects as a consequence of the pandemic is a key priority of education policy. That is why we have secured £1 billion of catch-up funding from the Treasury; £350 million of that is for the national tutoring programme, and £650 million is being distributed to all schools across the country on the basis of £80 per pupil and £240 per pupil in special school settings. That money can be used to target the children who most need to catch up.

[910903] **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): A headteacher in my constituency has been in touch to express real concern about Ofsted assessing schools when there are no agreed standards or established precedents that relate to education in lockdown, so may I urge the Schools Minister to engage closely with headteachers and Ofsted to ensure that any assessment process is fair to schools as they operate now, and reflects the hugely difficult circumstances to which they have been subjected?

Nick Gibb: Formal Ofsted inspections have been suspended until the summer term. What is happening is that Ofsted is engaged in monitoring visits for schools rated “inadequate” or “requires improvement”, and having discussions about the quality of the curriculum and the challenges that schools are facing with remote education. We have set out clearly what we expect

schools to do with regard to remote education, including the fact that at key stage 1 there should be three hours of remote education, at key stage 2 four hours, and at key stages 3 and 4 five hours a day.

[910898] **Taiwo Owatemi** (Coventry North West) (Lab) [V]: As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Erasmus, I have a vested interest in ensuring that British students across the country have access to the best international education programme possible, so two weeks ago I wrote a letter, which was signed by colleagues across the House, about the Turing scheme that is replacing Erasmus. I have yet to receive a response from Ministers. Although we welcome the Turing programme, it could be greatly improved to become a notable and truly beneficial exchange programme, so will the Secretary of State commit today to arranging a meeting with my colleagues and me to discuss this further?

Gavin Williamson: We are very much looking forward to the APPG being rechristened the Turing APPG, hopefully in the not-too-distant future. I can confirm that the Minister for Universities, my hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan), would be delighted to meet the hon. Lady and her colleagues on the all-party parliamentary group to see what more can be done to expand these truly great opportunities for all young people right across the United Kingdom to see the world and to learn from the experience of studying in so many institutions right across the globe.

[910905] **Matt Vickers** (Stockton South) (Con) [V]: Stockton South has some of the best teachers in the country, and they are working hard to ensure that youngsters who might lack the support and resources that they need at home are not left behind as a result of school closures. What is my right hon. Friend doing to ensure that when schools reopen, deprived youngsters can catch up and still reach their full potential?

Gavin Williamson: I echo my hon. Friend's thanks to all teachers in Stockton South, and not only for the amazing work they did last term, but for what they are continuing to do. He is absolutely right to highlight children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. That is why our covid catch-up fund is so incredibly important in helping them to catch up, and why our roll-out of 1.3 million laptops right across the country is so important in helping to support schools. The best thing that we can do is see all schools return at the earliest possible date, with children benefiting from being back in the classroom and learning directly from their teachers.

[910900] **Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP) [V]: A really concerning new report from the National Union of Students has found that 69% of student renters are worried about not being able to meet their rental payments. With rent arrears building up, along with tuition fee debt in England, what additional support can be provided, and why not give more students access to universal credit and, therefore, the housing support that they really need?

Gavin Williamson: We will always look at how best we can support students. We have announced an additional £20 million of hardship funding for students, to be administered through universities in England, and we will continue to keep that under review.

[910907] **Bim Afolami** (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): Many students have suffered as a result of inadequate teaching and pastoral care at their universities, in addition to unfair costs for accommodation that they are not even allowed to stay in. What action will my right hon. Friend take to ensure that the Government are a voice for students, that they stand up for students and that they allow them to be compensated in some way by their universities when those universities fail them and let them down?

Gavin Williamson: There can be no excuses when universities are not offering the type of remote teaching and educational support that is expected. That is why it is so critical that, where that remote teaching and support is not happening, students' rights are upheld. We saw at the tail end of last year that students' rights were upheld and universities had to redress that. That is the right approach. We recognise how important it is to support students, which is why we will continue to look at how best we can support them through programmes such as the hardship fund.

[910901] **Stella Creasy** (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Ministers will have heard the concern across the House about the safety of special needs schools and nurseries. To reassure us, can they tell us what meetings they have had over the past two weeks with Public Health England about the evidence of transmission associated with special educational needs pupils, their parents and staff at those schools, and the pupils, parents and staff in nursery settings? What does that evidence tell us about transmission over the last two weeks?

Vicky Ford: We are in continual contact with Public Health England, through the Department, and we also meet early years representatives. I have been touring special schools virtually throughout. Our early years are vital years of education for the youngest, which they cannot get back, our special schools provide vital support for young people with disabilities, and alternative provision settings are vital for our most vulnerable. All those settings are usually smaller than other settings, which is why they have less of an impact on community transmission—it should be remembered that we closed schools to reduce community transmission—and why PHE continues to advise us that closing them is not needed to bring down the R number.

[910902] **Paul Girvan** (South Antrim) (DUP) [V]: I thank all those teachers who are going above and beyond to ensure that their pupils can access education, virtual or

otherwise. What measures is the Department taking to ensure that children can continue to go through the statementing process for educational needs while our schools are closed due to covid restrictions, and after they open?

Vicky Ford: We have kept our schools open to those with the most severe special needs and disabilities and those with an education, health and care plan. We continue to back up and support local authorities to improve their special educational needs and disabilities provision, to make sure that those young people who need an EHC plan can get one as soon as possible. We are working with councils all across the country.

[910911] **Lucy Allan** (Telford) (Con) [V]: I thank my right hon. Friend the Education Secretary for bringing forward the independent review of children's social care. I am hugely grateful that this important manifesto commitment did not find itself on the back burner given all the other challenges we face. Will my right hon. Friend tell the House what he expects the review to achieve for those children in care or on the fringes of care?

Gavin Williamson: This is something everyone in this House feels incredibly passionately about. I know through seeing at first hand, coming from a family with parents who fostered for many years, how important it is to get high-quality children's social care right in this country. I want a real revolution to come out of this report, and I am incredibly pleased that Josh MacAlister has taken on this role to deliver the changes that I think Members on both sides of the House want. I have said quite clearly that I do not want him to hold back in tackling difficult issues. I want to see change, improvement and children's lives transformed. By working on a cross-party basis, I believe that that is what we can deliver.

[910906] **Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab) [V]: The education charity Parentkind revealed that only 9% of parents—[*Inaudible.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Unfortunately, that brings us to the end of the time for questions, due to a connection failure. I am suspending the House for three minutes to enable the necessary arrangements for the next business to be made.

3.36 pm

Sitting suspended.

Police National Computer

3.39 pm

The Minister for Crime and Policing (Kit Malthouse):

With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the technical issues that we have experienced with the police national computer over the past week.

The records and information held by the police help to keep us safe, but they, like many other public bodies, have an obligation to ensure that the information they hold is properly managed. As I am sure you are aware, Mr Speaker, not all information and records held by the police can be held indefinitely. To ensure that the police are complying with their legal obligations in respect of the records they hold, a regular housekeeping process is undertaken to delete personal data and records from the police national computer and linked databases: in this case, data relating to individuals who were investigated by the police but where no further action was taken. This is undertaken for a variety of reasons, but chiefly to abide by legal obligations.

With such a large database, holding some 13 million records, an automated process is used to remove records that the police national computer has no legal right to hold. A weekly update was designed by engineers and applied to the police national computer, which then automatically triggers deletions across the PNC, and other linked databases. Last week, the Home Office became aware that, as a result of human error, the software that triggers these automatic deletions contained defective coding and had inadvertently deleted records that it should not have, and indeed had not deleted some records that should have been deleted. An estimated 213,000 offence records, 175,000 arrest records and 15,000 person records are being investigated as potentially having been deleted. It is worth the House noting that multiple records can be held against the same individual, so the number of individuals affected by this incident is likely to be lower. Operational partners are still able to access the police national computer, which holds, as I say, over 13 million records. Clearly this situation is very serious, and I understand that colleagues across this House will have concerns, which of course I share.

By your leave, Mr Speaker, I want to set out for the House the steps that we have taken to deal with this complex incident. On the evening of 10 January—the same day the Home Office became aware of the incident—engineers put a stop on the automated process to ensure that no further deletions took place. All similar automated processes have also been suspended. Early last week, Home Office civil servants and engineers worked quickly to alert the police and other operational colleagues, and established a bronze, silver and gold command to manage the incident and co-ordinate a rapid response. The gold command provided rapid guidance for police forces and other partners to ensure that they were kept abreast of the situation.

Secondly, Home Office officials and engineers, working closely with the National Police Chiefs' Council, police forces and other partners, immediately initiated rapid work, through the gold command, to assess the full scale and impact of the incident. This included undertaking a robust and detailed assessment and verification of all affected records, followed by developing and implementing a plan to recover as much of the data and records as is

possible, and to develop plans to mitigate the impacts of any lost data. This is being done in four phases. Phase 1 involves writing and testing a code to bring back accurate lists of what has been deleted as a result of the incident. Phase 2 will involve running that code and then doing detailed analysis on the return to fully analyse the records that have been lost and establish the full impact. Phase 3 will be to begin the recovery of the data from the police national computer and other linked systems. Phase 4 will involve work to ensure that we are deleting any data that should have been deleted as usual when this incident first began. Phase 1 of the process has taken place over the weekend, and I am assured that it has gone well. The second phase is now under way, and I will hopefully have an update in the next few days.

While any loss of data is unacceptable, other tried-and-tested law enforcement systems are in place that contain linked data and reports to support policing partners in their day-to-day efforts to keep us safe: for example, the police national database or other local systems. The police are able to use these systems to do simultaneous checks.

I urge patience while we continue our rapid internal investigation and begin the recovery. I hope the House will appreciate that the task in front of us is a complex one. Public safety is the top priority of everyone working at the Home Office, and I have full faith that Home Office engineers, our partners in the National Police Chiefs' Council and police forces throughout the country, with whom we are working, are doing all they can to restore the data. Although that is rightly our immediate priority, the Home Secretary and I have commissioned an internal review as to the circumstances that led to this incident, so that lessons can be learned. I will update the House regularly on the process. I commend this statement to the House.

3.44 pm

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I am grateful to the policing Minister for his statement and for advance sight of it, and I am grateful to him for his briefing over the weekend, but I must ask where the Home Secretary is. The loss of hundreds of thousands of pieces of data—data so important for apprehending suspects and safeguarding vulnerable people—is extraordinarily serious. It was the Home Secretary who needed to show leadership and take control. That is what previous Home Secretaries have done in a crisis. On the Passport Office, Windrush and knife crime, whatever their mistakes, Home Secretaries came to and answered to this House; they did not just offer a media clip, as has happened today. This Home Secretary, who is failing on violent crime and failing on the Windrush compensation scheme, with chaos on border testing, and who was found to have broken the ministerial code, will now not even answer to Parliament and the public on this most serious of issues. The Home Secretary likes to talk tough, but when the going gets tough, she is nowhere to be seen.

Will the Minister tell us when the Home Secretary first knew about the data loss and why the public had to find out from the media? Given that the initial reports were of 150,000 items of data, and the figure now seems to be over 400,000, can the Minister be sure of how much data has actually been lost? In his statement, the Minister said that on 10 January the process of deletion was stopped, but will he confirm that the faulty script

[Nick Thomas-Symonds]

was introduced into the police national computer on 23 November, meaning that the problem was not identified for 48 days?

The Minister said in his statement on Friday that “the loss relates to individuals who were arrested and then released with no further action”.

This is serious in itself. For example, let us consider cases of domestic abuse: when suspects are released, the data becomes very important to protecting victims and making further arrests. In a letter, Deputy Chief Constable Malik, the National Police Chiefs’ Council lead for the police national computer, said that the deleted DNA contains

“records...marked for indefinite retention following conviction of serious offences.”

This is, therefore, not only data on individuals released with no further action; it includes data about convicted criminals, so will the Minister now correct the statement that he issued on Friday?

Will the Minister confirm whether 26,000 DNA records and 30,000 fingerprint records held on separate databases have been deleted? Will he assure the House that the engagement with the PNC to delete the Schengen information system—SIS II—database was unrelated? What is the full impact on the UK visa system from the data loss, and how is it affecting ongoing police investigations and intelligence gathering?

The PNC and the police national database are due to be replaced by the national law enforcement data programme, but the assessment by the Infrastructure and Projects Authority is that the successful delivery of the project is in doubt. Is it still in doubt? If so, why? There are reports that 18 months ago senior police outlined that the Home Office was not investing in the PNC and that it presented a significant risk to the police’s ability to protect the public. Was that warning heeded?

Finally, if it is not possible to recover data via the process currently under way, what contingency plans are in place to seek to recover the data via other means? Does the Minister accept that maintaining the security of this vital data is critical to addressing crime, bringing criminals to justice and keeping our communities safe, and that if the Home Office is not doing that, it is failing the public?

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Gentleman has given me a long series of questions, which I shall try to answer as efficiently as I possibly can. Once the error became clear to the team, they escalated it up through the Home Office, first of all on Monday, and then through Wednesday into ministerial and other offices, in accordance with normal protocols.

As to the scale of the data, while the figure of 400,000 has been quoted, that is an accumulation of the various bits of information that may or may not have been deleted. As I said, a number of bits of information may apply to one individual, so the number of individual records on the PNC that might be affected could be smaller, but we will not know exactly until later this week, once the programme that is being analysed has come to an end.

As for when the script was introduced, that was indeed six weeks prior to what is called the weeding date, which is when the deletion was due to take place.

That is standard practice, to load the script into the system some weeks before it is due to run. It did not run until the Saturday, when the error within it became immediately apparent.

As to the records that are affected, I am informed that the records that have been deleted are those that relate to people who were apprehended or put under investigation by the police. When there was subsequently a declaration of no further action to be taken, if there were prior convictions or offences on the police national computer, my information—what I have been told thus far—is that that those will remain. Only information relating to that specific incident, which was no further action, may or may not have been deleted. To a certain extent, that helps to mitigate some of the risk.

It is also worth pointing out that, as I said in my statement, there are other databases, both locally and those held nationally, such as IDENT the fingerprint database or the national DNA database, which may also be searched. The PNC draws its data from a number of other databases and when, because of our legal obligations, a deletion request is put on to the police national computer, it cascades deletions down through the other databases in accordance with the law. Those subsequent deletions were halted immediately, and that should help us, we hope, with recoverability of the dataset.

The hon. Gentleman asked about SIS II. That is indeed unrelated, and visa processing was suspended for approximately 24 hours. Everybody whose customer service threshold could not be met as a consequence of that was informed, but processing was resumed pretty quickly. We are assessing the impact on ongoing police investigations, while we analyse the report that has been run, which will give us the full picture of what has actually happened on the system.

Having said that, policing partners and the Home Office have put in place mitigations, not least informing other police forces—as Nav Malik did—that they should be making subsequent checks of their own and other databases, not least the police national database, which is a separate database from the police national computer and holds intelligence and other information.

On the national law enforcement data project, the replacement of the PNC, while that process has had its fair share of problems, it is fair to say we have undergone a reset. There is now a renewed sense of partnership working between the Home Office and the police, to make sure we get that much needed upgrade in technology correct.

The hon. Gentleman’s final point was about accepting the maintenance of data. He is absolutely right: we accept that it is very important that we, and indeed police forces and other governmental bodies that hold people’s personal data, do our best to maintain its integrity and to do so as faultlessly as possible. In these circumstances, we were attempting through this code to comply with our stringent legal obligations to delete personal data where it cannot be held by us or by other databases. Sadly, human error introduced into the code has led to this particular situation, which we hope is rectifiable. I am more than happy to keep the hon. Gentleman updated, as I did on Saturday afternoon, when I briefed him.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con) [V]: I thank the Minister, the Home Secretary and the police leadership around the country for the very professional way in

which they have responded to a most unfortunate error, an error that none of them wanted or made personally. Will the Minister give us a little bit more encouragement, however, because is it not the case that there are now many good ways to retrieve data that has been wrongly deleted? Might we be looking at a remedy for this in a few weeks' time, when the computer experts have finished their job?

Kit Malthouse: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right that the initial assessment was some optimism about the ability to recover this data, not least because it is held in a number of areas. We will not have the full picture until we get to the end of this week, once we have analysed the report and, of course, looked at the data that we should have deleted but have not because of this error. However, he is quite right that we should be optimistic about that and recognise that all is not lost. There are other ways that this data can be cross-checked, in particular as part of a police investigation. We are working with our policing partners to ensure that they make full use of that, so that they can proceed as usual with their investigations.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP) [V]: I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. Two weeks ago, the Home Secretary was boasting that the United Kingdom is now a safer place because of Brexit. However, before it was disbanded by the Government, the Select Committee on the Future Relationship with the European Union heard detailed expert evidence explaining why the United Kingdom is not a safer place as a result of the law enforcement part of the Brexit deal. One of the key reasons is that we have lost real-time access to Europe-wide databases on criminal records, DNA, fingerprints and, indeed, intelligence. That is not just my view but the expert view of Lord Ian Blair, the former Metropolitan Police Commissioner, and Lord Peter Ricketts, the former National Security Adviser. Now that situation has been further exacerbated by this loss of important fingerprint, DNA and arrest history records, which the police use for real time checks on our own UK-wide databases.

Mr Speaker, you really couldn't make it up, yet curiously the Home Secretary is nowhere to be seen. Instead, she has sent her junior Minister to take the flak. I have two areas of questions for him. First, was this data cleaning operation in any way connected to the removal of records from the police national computer following the end of the transition period? Does the 400,000 figure include the 40,000 records that were removed from the police national computer post Brexit, or is it on top of that? Secondly, given the UK-wide nature of the database, what discussions have taken place with police forces in the devolved nations? Will the Minister commit to full co-operation with Police Scotland and other devolved forces until this issue is resolved?

Kit Malthouse: On the hon. and learned Lady's two substantive questions, this had absolutely nothing to do with SIS II—the Schengen information system. These were, as I said earlier, deletions in line with our legal obligations not to hold data for people who are not of continuing interest to the police, under legislation that was enacted by this House some years ago. On the conversations with police forces, obviously the National Police Chiefs' Council lead has cascaded throughout

policing the information required to put in place mitigations. We will also, of course, co-operate as closely as possible, and I will be keeping my opposite number in the Scottish Government informed.

As to the sentiments expressed by the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) and the hon. and learned Lady about the Home Secretary, I can only apologise for the fact that they are facing someone who is inferior to their own status, but they will understand that the Home Secretary has an enormous draw upon her duties. She takes her duties in this House extremely seriously—there is no doubt about it—but I have been much more, I guess, embedded with this over the last few months, as one would expect of a Minister of State who is standing by his Home Secretary, doing her bidding.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): I thank the Minister for providing the House with more detail on this unfortunate issue. Can he confirm that the police have a full understanding of what has happened and that appropriate measures will be taken to ensure that it is not repeated?

Kit Malthouse: That is absolutely right. I understand that the police were informed, along with the senior levels of the Home Office, on the Monday after the incident occurred, and they are part of the Gold group command that is dealing with the incident. As hon. Members will have seen from the letter that was leaked to *The Times*—the detailed letter that was sent round policing—the NPCC lead on this matter is very much at the table, working with us to ensure that we rectify it as soon as possible.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab) [V]: It is very hard to understand how 400,000 records could be deleted from such a crucial system without there being a proper back-up system in place. If this was the normal weekly process as ever, why was new coding being used? If new coding is often used, why are there not built-in safeguards? Is it true that Ministers were warned many months ago that their approach to the police national computer and database posed a significant risk to policing's ability to protect the public? What did the Home Secretary do about that?

Kit Malthouse: With a large database of something like 13 million records, it is routine to use mini-programs that run on the database to deal with data. As I understand it, this new coding was put in place as a weeding request from policing itself. Obviously, to ensure that this does not reoccur, one of the questions that we will have to answer is: what went wrong not only in the writing of the code that introduced this error but in the quality and system checking that then sat behind it? Once we have gone through the exercise of ensuring that we have rectified this as much as we can, that will be exactly the kind of lesson that we learn.

There have been concerns about the process of replacing the police national computer and the police national database, but over the last few months, the Home Secretary and I have worked hard to put reset processes in place around that project. I am confident that we are now on a better footing to move forward to a brighter future for police technology.

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con) [V]: This incident is not without precedent—the Minister will recall that in 2007, 25 million child benefit records were lost. Can he confirm that everything possible will be done to remedy this and to learn whatever lessons need to be learned?

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend is right that, over the years, there have been a number of issues around governmental handling of data. It is a large and complex issue, and we are dealing with huge amounts of data that are very difficult to handle. He can be assured, and I hope the rest of the House will be, that we are working flat out to get on top of this problem and to rectify it. The first stage of our plan has gone well. The second stage is under way, and I expect to report better progress to the House in due course.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD) [V]: *The Times* reports today that the Home Office was warned in July 2019 that police databases were “creaking” and that they operated on

“end of life, unsupported hardware and software”.

It further reports that the Home Office response was that it would only “fix on fail”. In other words, knowing that there was likely to be failure, the Home Office decided to just let it happen and fix it if it had to. Can the Minister tell the House whether there was ministerial involvement in that response, and if there was not, does he not think there should have been?

Kit Malthouse: I was not necessarily in post at that point, so I do not know whether there was ministerial involvement in that particular decision. I can tell the right hon. Gentleman that we have been working quite hard over the last year or so to get the technology projects in the Home Office—the national law enforcement data programme and the new communications network for the police—back on track. They have had their fair share of problems—that is no national secret—but I am confident that things are in a better position now than they were before.

While I understand the issues claimed in *The Times* today around the police national computer, it is worth pointing out that this issue had nothing to do with the state or otherwise of the hardware and software of the police national computer. It was pure human error in coding and was not necessarily a reflection of the age of that system. We are committed to putting in place a brand-new system. That project is now back on track after a reset, and I am confident that over the next two or three years, we will see a significant change in the way UK policing uses technology.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con) [V]: Does my hon. Friend agree that, instead of attempting to score political points from this unfortunate error, the Opposition parties should be engaging constructively and working in the national interest?

Kit Malthouse: Yes. It is the hope of all Government Members that Opposition Members will work constructively with us. I had a very constructive briefing over the weekend with the hon. Member for Torfaen, the shadow Policing Minister, the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones); and the Chair of the

Home Affairs Committee, the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper). We are committed to as much transparency as the House requires, because with a large, complex database, when human error is introduced, these kinds of issue need to be exposed so that we can all learn from them, whatever situation, political or otherwise, we are in.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab) [V]: The Home Secretary likes to talk tough on crime, but the shocking loss of 400,000 records is a major failing on her watch and she is incapable of facing up to it. She should be here before the House today. The Policing Minister talked in his statement about mitigation. Can he give the House an absolute guarantee that no investigation has been or will be compromised because the deleted information could not be cross-referenced?

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Gentleman again casts aspersions on the Home Secretary, who is one of the hardest-working politicians I have come across in my 20-odd years in politics, and I think it is deeply unfair to make that claim. As he knows, it is perfectly usual for Ministers of State to take urgent questions or indeed make statements in this House, and we are doing no different from what a Government that he supported did in the past.

We will know the full extent of the impact of this issue over the next few days, as our plan swings into action, and we are working very closely with police forces across the country, through the National Police Chiefs’ Council, to make sure that any operational impact is obviated or mitigated.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con) [V]: I thank the Minister for his statement and for what I know is his personal commitment to resolving this matter. He will appreciate that offences are sometimes continued, which may be for lack of evidence, but that material that is retained may subsequently become valuable if it can be cross-checked in the event of arrests for subsequent offences. Will he make sure that obtaining a back-up of such material, which can be of importance to future prosecutions or investigations, is a top priority, and that all the other related criminal justice agencies will be kept fully informed of progress on this matter?

Kit Malthouse: In his usual succinct way, my hon. Friend puts his finger on the button. We are working very hard at the moment, as I say, to scope exactly what has happened and make sure we can retrieve exactly the sort of data that he refers to from the various other databases on which it is held—both at force and indeed at national level, or even, for example, at forensic provider level. There is some optimism that we may be able to do that, although we will not know for certain until later this week.

Having said that, as my hon. Friend will know from his very distinguished career at the Bar, the police have a number of other databases and sources of information from which they can seek corroborating evidence or otherwise through an investigation, and as I said before, we are working closely with them to make sure that those mitigations are in place while we get this problem sorted out.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab) [V]: Millions of people, including me, watched ITV's excellent recent drama series "The Pembrokeshire Murders", which showed how painstaking police examination of old DNA evidence helped to convict a brutal serial killer many years after he committed his heinous crimes. Is it possible—and I think the public and victims of crime deserve an honest and candid answer from the Minister on this—that records that could help to convict serious offenders in the future have been lost forever?

Kit Malthouse: It is worth stressing, as I said before, that this data loss relates to people who have been subject to no further action from the police, and any biometric data—DNA, fingerprint or otherwise—that may have been deleted from the police national computer relates only to that offence for which no further action has been taken. At the moment—I am trying to be candid with the hon. Gentleman, as he urged me to be—I cannot give him an exact picture of what the downstream impact is, but it is worth pointing out that the police national computer is not the only place in which records such as the DNA records he refers to are held. We obviously have a separate DNA database, and then forensic providers who provide those samples also have their own DNA databases, and there is obviously intelligence that remains on the police national database as opposed to the police national computer. However, our primary effort at the moment is to scope the scale of the issue, and then to seek the rectification that both he and I would be keen to see.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con) [V]: I thank my hon. Friend for updating the House so swiftly on this unfortunate incident of human error. Can he confirm that everything humanly possible is being done to rectify it, and will he commit to updating the House on the recovery of the data?

Kit Malthouse: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. I can assure him that we are doing everything we possibly can. We have a very dedicated engineering team who have been working flat out since the incident occurred, including over the weekend, to seek rectification. As soon as I have more information about phase 2, I will make it known to the House through whatever channel is agreed with Mr Speaker.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP) [V]: The Minister has told the House this afternoon that the affected records apply to cases where individuals were arrested and then released with no further action. However, a letter sent from the National Police Chiefs' Council to senior officers stated that records potentially deleted in error include records that have previously been marked "for indefinite retention following conviction of serious offences". In light of what the Minister has told the House and in light of his earlier statement of 16 January, was the National Police Chiefs' Council incorrect to make that statement to senior officers?

Kit Malthouse: No, the person from the NPCC was not incorrect, I believe, although the picture has evolved, it is certainly true to say, over the past few days. The information I have been given thus far is that where an individual may be on the police national computer for a

number of offences over time, but on this occasion, for a particular offence, was released with no further action, it is only the information that relates to that particular offence for which there was no further action that may or may not have been deleted.

Having said that—I guess it is safe to put this caveat in—we are in the process of analysing exactly what the impact of this loss has been. Once that becomes clearer, I will be more than happy to give the hon. Gentleman and others in the House the assurance that they need or, indeed, to give the wider conclusions of what that report is telling us. These are all initial views of what we believe may well have been happening. The first phase of our recovery plan has gone well; the second phase, which is analysing what the report is telling us about this frankly huge database, will come in the next few days, and then I will be able to give more certain answers.

Julie Marson (Hertford and Stortford) (Con) [V]: Can my hon. Friend confirm for my constituents in Hertford and Stortford that the police national computer database is a really important tool to help our brilliant police and that, thanks to the swift action he has outlined, it remains so, notwithstanding what is an isolated incident of human error?

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend speaks the truth, which is that the police national computer sits at the heart of British policing, providing enormously helpful information to police forces across the country seeking to apprehend criminals. It is still in use—it is still being used as we speak for the reasons that it needs to be, not least because we are talking about a very small percentage of the database overall that has been affected—and that is critically why we have committed to investing in a replacement for the police national computer, which is a system that I guess is a legacy from the past. We want to ensure that the police have the best technology and the best data handling available to them, so that they can do their best to fight crime on our behalf.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab) [V]: The Minister will be well aware that this news will have caused great alarm right across the country, and certainly to the residents of Warwick and Leamington. Can he explain to us what assessment he has made in terms of safeguarding and those who are vulnerable, including the victims of domestic abuse? Does he agree that now is not the time to be cutting 87 back office staff from Warwickshire police, including the domestic abuse unit and all the corporate knowledge that goes with that?

Kit Malthouse: As I say, we are in the middle of phase 2 of our recovery plan, which is assessing precisely the scope of the issue we are facing and then moving into the recoverability of the data, so that we can mitigate exactly the circumstances that the hon. Gentleman mentions. As to decisions made by the police and crime commissioner for Warwickshire, I hesitate to inject an element of politics into this matter, but it should come as no surprise that the police and crime commissioner for Warwickshire is a Conservative, and it has routinely been rated as a very high-performing force.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con) [V]: I am grateful for the update that has been provided to the House and the work that is being done to try to recover

[Dr Kieran Mullan]

these records, but does my hon. Friend agree that the strength of condemnation of the Home Secretary from those on the Opposition Benches contrasts with their desire to install as Home Secretary someone who previously said we should not have any of these kinds of records in the first place?

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend raises a very pertinent point. Of course, we were trying in this process to do what the law tells us to do, which is to respect people's privacy and to delete data that we are supposed to delete. It is possibly true that some Members on the Opposition Benches—not, I have to say, the hon. Member for Torfaen, but others on those Benches—have an interesting relationship with the notion of the police using and interpreting data. This is an issue of technical complexity, which software engineering experts in the Home Office are grappling with day by day. We will bring more information as we have it, but it is safe to say—I know that my hon. Friend takes a strong interest in policing and the policing family—that we are doing our best to ensure that the police are in as good a position as they can be to continue to fight crime.

Mr Speaker: Let us head over to Northern Ireland with Jim Shannon—a virtual Jim Shannon!

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) [V]: My goodness, Mr Speaker; thank you very much, whether virtually or in person, but virtually today.

I thank the Minister for his most comprehensive statement. My concern lies in the fact that there are cases that are sensitively linked to Northern Ireland. I would appreciate an understanding that contact has been made with the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the Department of Justice in Northern Ireland to go over how the data breach may have affected Northern Ireland citizens and residents and, further, whether it is felt that victims of crimes in particular may be affected and what steps are to be taken if they are affected.

Kit Malthouse: As I say, the whole of UK policing has been involved, through the National Police Chiefs' Council, in the effort both to comprehend the scale of the problem and then to put in place mitigation. The hon. Gentleman is quite right; as usual, victims of crime are uppermost in his mind, as they are, hopefully, in all of ours. I will be able to tell him later in the week, hopefully, what the precise impact might or might not have been and what the mitigations that we put in place will do to ensure that victims are not impacted while we recover this data and get ourselves back on an even keel.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con) [V]: I thank the Minister for his statement. Can he confirm that the human error that caused this problem is being designed out of the system and that it would be more helpful for the Opposition to hold to account their own police and crime commissioner in the west midlands, who recently saw more than 16,000 crimes go unrecorded?

Kit Malthouse: It is often hard to design out human error in a system that interacts with humans, but my hon. Friend is quite right that one of the lessons that we need to learn from this process—and we will in time—is

not necessarily just how the human error occurred so that we can prevent that from happening in the first place, but how the quality assessment system that should have picked it up over time before it ran did not do so. I suppose the reassuring bit of this incident is that the moment that script did run on the system, it rang alarm bells in the Home Office and a rectification plan swung into place. That should give some assurance that we are at least on top of problems where they occur; the next step is to ensure that they do not occur in the first place.

As to my hon. Friend's wider point about the conduct or otherwise of the west midlands police and crime commissioner, I think it will become pretty clear in the run-up to the police and crime commissioner elections in May, as people focus on crime performance, where they should put their cross in the box.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab) [V]: This extraordinarily serious scandal happened on the Home Secretary's watch, yet, disappointingly, she is not here. As a former police officer, I know at first hand the value of the PNC. The reality is that the loss of fingerprints and DNA evidence will mean that the police are unable to tie suspects to crime scenes. In essence, this will result in criminals walking free and evading justice. Will the Minister outline what steps are being taken to ensure that this sort of loss never happens again?

Kit Malthouse: I do not know whether I ought to be taking offence at the hon. Gentleman's suggestion of my obvious lack of suitability to appear before such an esteemed audience as Her Majesty's Opposition, given their seeming obsession with the Home Secretary. I would have thought the most important thing was to ensure that the integrity of police data is as good as it can be and that the police are in the best position possible to fight crime. As I outlined in my statement—for the hon. Gentleman's sake, I will say it once again—we are in the process of making sure that we understand the scale of the problem and then putting in place rectification and retrieving the data that is required. The stage that follows that is learning exactly the lesson that he wants us to learn, which is how we can ensure that this does not happen again.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con) [V]: I thank my hon. Friend for updating the House; he is more than capable of doing this. A previous shadow Home Secretary stated in the Chamber in 2018:

"The state has no business keeping records on people who are not criminals."—[*Official Report*, 11 June 2018; Vol. 642, c. 640.]

Does my hon. Friend agree that the outcry from the Opposition Benches is indeed in contrast to that statement?

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend, in his usual forthright way, identifies the perhaps interesting relationship that Opposition Members have had with UK policing and, indeed, the data and intelligence tools required by the police to put them in the best position to fight crime. I know that he and I will stand shoulder to shoulder, whatever the Opposition might say, to ensure that British policing gets the best technology and information it needs to ensure that it can fight crime in my constituency and in his, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year, as it has been doing over the past 12 months.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab) [V]: The Home Secretary's office claimed four days ago that no records of criminal or dangerous persons had been deleted. Can the Minister tell the House whether he knows that to be categorically true?

Kit Malthouse: One of the things that I said in my early statements was that I had asked officials from the police to confirm to me their initial assessment about what risk was posed to the public, and we are awaiting the conclusions of that particular report before I can give the hon. Gentleman a categorical answer. What we do know is that these particular records that were deleted related to people who were released by the police with no further action. They were either arrested or under investigation, but for that particular crime they were what is called NFA. To a certain extent, that gives some assurance, but I am afraid I cannot give him the full picture, possibly until later this week or early next week. I am fully committed to doing that.

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con) [V]: Can my hon. Friend confirm that those who are currently relying on police national computer data for investigations will be able to rerun their searches once the recovery work on the police national computer is complete?

Kit Malthouse: I can confirm that. The moment we have recovered the data and put things back as they were, and made sure that we have deleted the data that we should have deleted but had not, we will be encouraging police forces across the country to rerun their searches. It is worth reiterating what I said earlier, which is that there are other databases on which these searches can be run, and we are encouraging police officers and, indeed, working with the National Police Chiefs' Council, to make sure that those mitigations are used as fully as possible by UK policing.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): Could the Minister please update the House on whether the computer glitches reported today are having any impact upon recruiting? Could he also update us on the observation that police forces across the UK may be rejecting applications from re-joiners?

Kit Malthouse: It is very ingenious of my hon. Friend to get the uplift into this particular statement, but I welcome his ingenuity. The uplift is not affected at all. Recruitment is going well and, as he knows, we are ahead of target. He has raised with me the issue of his particular force not necessarily accepting applications from re-joiners. I am in the process of bottoming out that particular issue. As soon as I have an answer for him, I will let him have it.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP) [V]: Mr Deputy Speaker, you would have thought that the Home Secretary would be fronting up a statement on an issue as important as this, but I guess that requires a commitment to the job that she appears to lack. The National Police Chiefs' Council was told that the loss and mismatching of biometrics and DNA samples matched were hampering the investigation of crimes. Are they also interfering with the operation of the visa and

immigration system? Will we see visas granted that should not be and visas denied that should have been granted?

Kit Malthouse: First of all, may I object to the hon. Lady offering such a calumny against the Home Secretary? The Home Secretary is 200%—if that is possible—committed to the job. Throughout the covid pandemic, and indeed before, she has been at the helm on the bridge at the Home Office working as hard as any politician I have come across in my 20-odd years in frontline politics. It is deeply, deeply unfair to cast aspersions on her commitment, not least because even before she became Home Secretary I believe she was chair of the all-party party group on victims of crime and has a long-standing commitment to doing the best for those who have been subject to heinous acts by others.

On the hon. Lady's question about visas, there was a brief delay in the processing of visa applications for about 24 hours while the risk was assessed. It was deemed that the process could continue and nobody has subsequently been delayed.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): I thank the Minister for coming to the House so swiftly to update us and for committing to continue to do so if there are further developments. Will he confirm that the Home Office is working with the police and partners to try to recover the data and assess the full extent of the problem?

Kit Malthouse: What a novelty to be asked a question in person! I can confirm what my hon. Friend says. We are working extremely closely with policing partners—the National Police Chiefs' Council, the National Crime Agency and others—who use the computer system for their vital day-to-day work. They are involved in the gold group on this particular incident and obviously there have been ongoing conversations between the Home Secretary, the chairman of the National Police Chiefs' Council and others to make sure we are in lockstep in our plan to mitigate and then restore the database to its previous integrity.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab) [V]: Will the Minister confirm that among types of crime that very often lead to no further action are those involving domestic abuse? In that case, can he give an absolute guarantee to the House that there will be full recovery of all the data, or do we put at risk victims of domestic abuse when we know that building up a pattern of criminal behaviour is so important for the police and other agencies to bring offenders to book and to protect victims of domestic abuse?

Kit Malthouse: As I have said before, I am afraid I cannot, as yet, give the absolute cast-iron guarantee that the hon. Gentleman seeks on the restitution of the data. The early indicators are optimistic that we will be able to retrieve it, but until we have analysed the report that has been run today, we will not know for sure. That will take a few days. It is, however, worth pointing out to him that there are other systems elsewhere where the police retain intelligence about criminals and identifying markers, whether database or fingerprints. For example, for somebody who has been accused or for whom there is intelligence around domestic abuse, that detail may

[Kit Malthouse]

well be held on the police national database, which is a separate system to the police national computer. From that, the sort of person he is talking about may well be identifiable. However, I am afraid I cannot give him a full picture until, probably, the early part of next week.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con) [V]: My hon. Friend has repeatedly said that this dreadful state of affairs was caused by human error. Can he confirm to the House that there is no suggestion of any criminal intent? Can he also confirm that one of the strengths of the system is that when this error happened, it immediately set off alarm bells, so that action could be taken?

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend has a background in technology, so it is quite right that he should raise such pertinent questions. On his first question, no, there is no allegation of wrongdoing over and above error. On his second, he is absolutely right that we should be reassured by the fact that this human error was picked up the moment that it ran on the system. The ability to keep deleting items was stopped, and general instructions were sent out to the linked databases to stop them also deleting data, so we caught it pretty much as soon as it was happening. The question now is how quickly we can rectify it.

Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab) [V]: If these 400,000 lost records are not recovered, this human error will have an impact on public safety, will it not?

Kit Malthouse: We will not know entirely until we have analysed the reports, but early indications were optimistic about recovery, as I say, because data is held

elsewhere. If, in some circumstances, data is irrecoverable, we will have to consider other mitigations with policing partners to make sure that we remain as safe as we can in this country.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con) [V]: In a few weeks' time, Colin Pitchfork, who raped and brutally murdered two teenage girls in my South Leicestershire constituency some 30 years ago, will have a parole hearing. I know that the Minister is not responsible directly for the Parole Board, but he is responsible for public protection. First, can he write to me confirming that any records lost did not pertain to Colin Pitchfork? Secondly, and more importantly, can he give an assurance at the Dispatch Box that my constituents, if Colin Pitchfork is released, will not be put at risk by any of the records lost?

Kit Malthouse: I would be more than happy to write to my hon. Friend, as he requests. It is worth pointing out that the issue we are dealing with is people who have been subject to police investigation, or arrested and released with no further action. That would seem to exclude Mr Pitchfork from consideration. However, I will make sure and write to my hon. Friend. He and I will both want to make sure that the offender management system, which is administered by the Ministry of Justice, ensures that the conditions put on that individual when, or if, he is released mean that people in my hon. Friend's constituency, who wish to be safe, remain safe.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Minister for his statement, and for responding to questions from Members. For cleaning purposes, this sitting is now suspended for three minutes.

4.33 pm

Sitting suspended.

Opposition Day

[14TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I advise the House that Mr. Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

4.37 pm

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House believes that the Government should stop the planned cut in Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit in April and give certainty today to the six million families for whom it is worth an extra £1,000 a year.

I am not here to claim that Conservative MPs are heartless, lack compassion, or have insufficient regard for the poorest people in this country. I know that after the vote on free school meals, many Conservative MPs, mainly after comments made by other Conservative MPs, received a high degree of personal abuse, and I want to make it clear unequivocally that that is wrong. I am here to put forward a clear and, I believe, compelling case that reducing universal credit and working tax credit this April would be fundamentally the wrong decision. It would be a profound mistake for families, for the economy and for our ability to effectively tackle and recover from the covid pandemic.

Before putting forward that case, I wish to address the Prime Minister's suggestion that Parliament is somehow not the right place to have this discussion. Opposition days have been a feature of our parliamentary system for many decades. They were used very successfully by the Conservative party when it was in opposition—for example, when the Labour Government were defeated over resettlement rights for Gurkhas in 2009, or over post office closures. All majority Governments, except this one, have accepted that if they cannot win a vote in Parliament on one of their policies, then they have to change that policy. This decision cannot be deferred until a Budget, because the Government cancelled the November Budget and have not brought forward a Finance Bill since March.

I put it to all Members that Parliament is exactly the right place to have a discussion of such consequence to the country. The Government cannot expect to preach parliamentary sovereignty one week, and run away from parliamentary scrutiny the next. Too often, the Prime Minister seems unwilling to abide by basic democratic norms and to accept proper scrutiny and accountability. We have seen in the US where that can end.

Let me also say at the outset that, throughout the pandemic, the Opposition have always sought to be constructive. The official Opposition want the national strategy to succeed. In that spirit, we welcomed the changes that the Government made to universal credit at the beginning of the crisis. The £20-a-week weekly increase, and the suspension of conditionality and the minimum income floor, were necessary steps to support people. Recognition must also go to frontline Department for Work and Pensions staff, who kept our social security system going through the early stages of the crisis, making sure that hundreds of thousands of new claimants

received the support they needed. All those staff deserve our praise, from the civil servants working in the Department to the security guards I met recently, who face difficult working conditions keeping Jobcentre Plus offices open.

However, the fact that such urgent changes were required to provide a basic safety net is a telling assessment of where the social security system was when we went into the crisis. If we cannot properly support people in a time of need without emergency surgery to the system, it is not fit for purpose. The fact is that support for people in this country when they lose their job or cannot work is significantly lower than it is in comparable European countries.

I will address three points: how we got here; the case for reversing this cut to secure our economy; and, finally, the human impact if the Government refuse to change course.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that a pressing reason to have a debate and vote on this issue today is the fact that all the evidence suggests that the restrictions resulting from the measures taken to deal with covid have hit the poorest in society hardest? Poverty is up, and those people who most depend on this kind of support are the ones who are most damaged at the moment.

Jonathan Reynolds: I agree. Inequality, and the differential impact on people, has been one of the defining features of this crisis. I do not think anyone can avoid that. It is relevant to make that point in this debate.

We have to be honest about the state of our social security system going into the crisis. Since 2010, poverty has increased significantly in the UK. In addition, people who were in poverty in 2010 are now so much deeper in poverty than they were. This is not an argument about definitions. Conservatives themselves were the driving influences behind bodies such as the Social Metrics Commission, which came up with a new definition of poverty that was actually very similar to the one that has traditionally been used. The Government's own estimate is that 4.2 million British children live in poverty. That is shameful, wrong and unnecessary.

The UK, along with Ireland, is an outlier compared with the rest of Europe when it comes to inequality. That means that the reality for millions of families is that they went into this crisis already under significant pressure. As the Resolution Foundation said in 2019, the 1.7% increase in universal credit that year was the first working-age benefit increase for five years. Last year, the real value of basic out-of-work support was lower than when John Major was Prime Minister, so anyone claiming that the system is too generous, or who is trying to resurrect the stigmatising rhetoric of George Osborne, simply has no case to make.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is a reasonable man—I like him. He is making a sensible speech. While we are being honest about social security systems, is it still the Opposition's policy to abolish universal credit, as it would have been had they won the general election in December 2019, although it is widely accepted to have been successful in flexing to expand in the current crisis? Is it still Her Majesty's Opposition's policy to abolish the entire system, and what do they propose putting in its place?

Jonathan Reynolds: Yes, it is our policy to replace universal credit—not to abolish the welfare state, as some of those videos from Conservative central office have tried to make out today. After I address the causes and the question before us today, I will be happy to talk about some other problems that go beyond the core amount of universal credit, and about why replacing universal credit is the right policy. But before we get to that point, I have to stress that, if this cut goes ahead, it will leave unemployment support at its lowest level ever relative to average earnings. That is not just morally unjustifiable; it is economically incompetent. Cutting unemployment support in the middle of a recession is always the wrong choice, which is why no Government have done so since the great depression.

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his tone at the beginning of the debate. Just for our understanding, will he tell us whether the Opposition propose making this increase permanent? If so, how do they propose to pay for it?

Jonathan Reynolds: We believe that this uplift should stay in place during the crisis, and I do not think anyone believes that the crisis will end in April. I will make some points about long-term proposals near the end of my speech, as well as about why the whole system requires much more considerable reform than just tinkering around with the core amount.

The cost of paying for all this is significant: around £6 billion. That would vary depending on the levels of unemployment throughout the year, but any measure right now that cuts public spending or raises taxes in the middle of the biggest economic downturn for 300 years would be the wrong policy. Decisions will have to be made as we get into the middle of this decade to address the levels of debt that have been accrued by the Government during this crisis, but that is not the right choice now.

I want to focus on the point raised by the hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott), because if the Government are seriously thinking about economic recovery, cutting universal credit is like pulling the rug from under the economy's feet. This £20 a week is not saved by families; it is spent in shops and businesses across the country, stimulating the economy. We all agree that this pandemic and the unemployment crisis will not be over by April this year, and whatever protestations we have heard on social media or in the press—and, frankly, however people vote today—I know that there are many people on the Government Benches who agree with this case. The former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb), recently said:

“Withdrawing the uplift would reduce the spending power of people on lowest incomes. This will likely reduce consumption, meaning families going without essentials and household debts rising. It would also see a reduction in spending just when the economy needs it most.”

I could not agree more with that assessment. He is also right to draw attention to the levels of personal debt for some households.

As well as the real value of benefits being historically low as we went into this crisis, the pandemic has meant very real additional costs for most families. There are more meals for people to cook at home, and more days to heat their house. People have devices and lights on at

times they would not normally, and have to buy what they need to teach their children at home. The clinically vulnerable have been forced to buy food locally, at a higher cost than in larger supermarkets. Everyone has experienced the pandemic differently, but for some the costs have piled on.

Citizens Advice told me this week that three quarters of the people it helps with debt who currently receive universal credit and working tax credit would have a negative budget if the £20 was cut. That means that they will have less money coming in than going out, and will not be able to cover basic essentials such as food or heating—and it will come at a time when one in three households has lost income because of covid, and 7.3 million people are behind on their bills.

The proposed cut to universal credit and working tax credit is not the only issue causing consternation in the country right now. I would particularly highlight the continuing injustice for those people on employment and support allowance and jobseeker's allowance, who did not even get the uplift to begin with. That is unjustifiable and discriminatory, and I ask the Minister if he would mind specifically referencing that point in his speech. Reversing the April cut to universal credit is a specific, clear and unavoidable decision that needs to be taken, which is why it is right that we are bringing it to Parliament today.

Some of the speeches that we will hear today will no doubt say that we should focus on jobs and getting people back to work, and not on social security. The Prime Minister said something along these lines at the Liaison Committee last week, but Members will know that universal credit is an in-work as well as an out-of-work benefit—40% of universal credit claimants are in work—so that argument does not work at all. To be frank, it would be helpful if someone told the Prime Minister that. Universal credit is also means-tested, so if people go back to work and do not qualify for it, they will not receive it at all. If we want to have a serious discussion about boosting employment and making work pay, let us discuss work allowances, the taper rate and deductions, but let not the Government try to use that as an excuse to do the wrong thing on this cut.

Others might say that support should be more targeted and the basic allowance is the wrong element to target. In that case, the Government would, logically, scrap the two-child limit or the benefit cap, which disproportionately affect people in the most difficulty—larger families in areas with higher housing costs. However, when we put that forward, it, too, was rejected.

Finally, there has been a proposal for a one-off payment to compensate people affected by this cut. That is an awful idea. It does not address the real-terms reduction in support, just as unemployment is expected to peak. More than that, although 6 million families are affected by this now, that cohort will change in composition throughout the year. A one-off payment based on who is eligible now will fail to support some of the people who need that help the most. So please, Minister, ask the Chancellor to think that one through again.

I know it sometimes frustrates Conservative Members that we are still determined to replace UC altogether—I was asked about that earlier—but I say to them that, if they will not listen to those on the Opposition Front Bench, they should read the work of the cross-party Select Committee on Work and Pensions and read the

report of the cross-party House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee, which is chaired by Lord Forsyth. They are clear and robust in highlighting the fundamental problems that currently exist: the five-week wait; the two-child limit; the erratic assessment period; the problems with paying for childcare in arrears; and the shocking design that means that many disabled people are worse off on UC. The last one of those is very personal to me and it simply is not right not to replicate how the severe disability premium worked under the previous arrangements. All this means that UC's brand is severely tarnished. If everything was working as well as Ministers sometimes say, would we really be a country where food banks have gone from being a niche form of support, mainly for those without recourse to public funds, to a mainstream and essential method of keeping people fed? Would we have had the fundamental increase in child poverty, which is getting bigger with every year of Conservative government? Those questions deserve answers.

Throughout the crisis, the Government have often been behind the curve, never out in front, and they have left some decisions, such as on furlough extension, to the very last minute, in a reckless game of brinkmanship. That is largely why we have, tragically, the highest death toll in Europe and the biggest economic downturn of any major economy. Let us not repeat that with this decision. We all know that families are looking at us, wondering what we will do to help make getting through this crisis just that bit easier. What they do not expect is the Government making it even harder. I hope that one thing we can all agree on is that the crisis has shone a light on some of the problems in the UK, problems that have made tackling the pandemic harder and provoked a discussion about what kind of society we want to rebuild when the pandemic is over.

If the ambition of Conservatives really is to level up the UK, it is hard to see how they can support a cut that would be so regressive for low-income families and which disproportionately affects the places the Government say they want to help. I am talking about families such as Bethany and her child in Blackpool. She said to me, "I was made redundant due to coronavirus. As a single parent to a one-year-old, universal credit is now the only income I receive. If the Government does cut £20 a week, I will become one of the statistics needing to use a food bank. It devastates me to think that I will not be able to provide for my child should this decision be finalised." Margaret, who has been volunteering at a food bank in Luton, says, "A young man came in for a food parcel. He looked thin and his face was grey. He sat down and he said that he thought he could last with no food until the universal credit came through, but he found that he couldn't. He'd come in on a Wednesday and his universal credit was due on the Friday." That is the reality before the cut has gone ahead. My inbox is full of personal accounts such as those. I urge every Member to look at what is in their inbox, read about the human cost of what it will be like for people if this cut goes ahead, address the worries people have about not being able to put food on the table, and think long and hard about the uncertainty and fear that all families face after 10 long, hard months of this pandemic.

I want to make a special appeal to the new MPs on the Conservative Benches whose constituents elected them in good faith for the first time in 2019. Many of them are the first Conservatives to ever be elected to

those places. They have already made history and their success is a significant personal achievement. They will be remembered, but so will their votes. Most of all, I urge everyone, when thinking about how to cast their vote today, to take a moment to reflect on what this cut will mean to the people who send us here: the uncertainty it will add in an already uncertain time; the loss it will bring when we have already lost so much; the fear it will cause when what people need is hope. So, for our constituents, for the economy and for the national interest, we need to cancel this cut and I ask every Member of the House today to support our motion to do so.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Before I call the Minister, I have three points to make. As people in the Chamber can see on the annunciator—I am not sure whether people can see it at home—there is a three-minute limit on Back-Bench contributions. For those who are contributing outside the Chamber, there is a timing clock, which you should be able to see on the bottom right hand corner of whatever device you are using. It would be a lot cleaner if Members could bring their contributions to a close before the three-minute limit is up, otherwise you will be interrupted by the Chair. For the convenience of everyone as well, the question will be put at 7.15 before we move on to the next business.

4.56 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Will Quince): I welcome today's debate. It gives me the opportunity to highlight some of the unprecedented support that this Government have provided to people right across our country who have been affected by covid-19. I can confirm that the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister will not be moved this afternoon.

Without doubt, this has been a challenging time for many. That is why, since the start of this pandemic, we have mobilised our welfare system like never before in modern times, with a wide-ranging package of measures worth more than £7 billion. Members across the House will raise the future of the £20 per week uplift to universal credit, which I will come on to shortly.

I want to start by talking about how well the Department and universal credit have stood up to the challenge of the pandemic. Many people have sadly lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic, or seen their incomes reduced. Universal credit and the Government's investment in the welfare safety net have been there to help catch many of those affected. That has been hugely important for the 3 million more people who have made a benefit claim since March last year.

I am so incredibly proud of how thousands of work coaches in jobcentres up and down our country have responded at speed and scale to ensure that we have supported those additional people in their hour of need, especially as the number of people on universal credit rose from 2.9 million last February to nearly 6 million in November. Through our £895 million investment, we are well on the way to meet the Government's pledge to recruit 13,500 new work coaches by the end of the financial year.

Gary Sambrook (Birmingham, Northfield) (Con): This morning, I chaired a meeting of the Northfield covid recovery strategy group with Becky from Northfield

[Gary Sambrook]

Community Partnership. We learnt this morning that, in Birmingham and Solihull, we will see an extra 430 work coaches, 24 of whom will be based at the Longbridge jobcentre. Does the Minister agree that that is a perfect example of how the Government are taking a proactive approach to making sure that we get people back to work as quickly as possible?

Will Quince: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. He is absolutely right that not just in his constituency, but in constituencies up and down the country, our Jobcentre Plus network of dedicated work coaches have worked incredibly hard to process an unprecedented number of claims and they stand ready to help support people back into work. That is exactly why we have secured this additional investment from Her Majesty's Treasury to, in effect, almost double the number of work coaches across our network across our country.

Work coaches are just one part of the jigsaw; the other is the universal credit system itself. Universal credit has, without doubt, stood up to the challenge of covid-19, whereas the previous legacy benefits system would have buckled under the pressure. Millions more were able to access financial support that is fairer and more generous than the legacy benefits system. We have made the processing of claims and paying people quickly the top priority for this Department. Over 90% of new claimants receive their payment in full and on time.

We have a modern, dynamic, agile, fairer welfare safety net that, in the face of unprecedented demand, ensured that millions of people were paid in full and on time. So what is Labour's position? It is to scrap it.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Is it now the policy of the Department, as the Prime Minister suggested at the Liaison Committee last week, that people should move from legacy benefits to universal credit in order to gain the £20 per week increase? If that is now the policy, what about the position of those who have been receiving the severe disability premium, who are not allowed to move to universal credit?

Will Quince: I thank the Chairman of the Work and Pensions Committee for that intervention. I would be very happy to meet him, alongside the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, to discuss, in particular, those in receipt of the severe disability premium. Yes, it is the position of Her Majesty's Government that we want more people to move from legacy benefits, including working tax credits, on to universal credit, because it is a modern, more dynamic benefits system; it is the future. However—this is a very important caveat—I would encourage anybody looking to move from legacy benefits to universal credit to first go on to gov.uk and check their eligibility, because it is important to note, as I know the Chairman of the Select Committee knows well, that on application for universal credit, the entitlement to legacy benefits will cease, so it is very important that people do check.

As I said, we have a modern, dynamic, agile, fairer welfare safety net that, in the face of unprecedented demand, ensured that millions of people were paid in full and on time. Therefore, it is quite astonishing that the position of Her Majesty's Opposition is to scrap

it—a system that, by any measure, has passed the most challenging of tests. This weekend they briefed to the papers with a press release entitled, “Cut to universal credit to hammer families in marginal Conservative seats”, playing politics with the lives of nearly 6 million vulnerable people rather than focusing on helping them through this pandemic. We will take no lectures whatsoever from Labour on universal credit. There is little doubt that had we relied on the legacy benefits system, we would have seen queues down the streets outside jobcentres and long delays leaving families facing financial disruption without support.

Jonathan Reynolds: As the Minister has raised press speculation, will he comment on the news in the papers at the weekend that the reason he is here and not the Secretary of State is that the Secretary of State agrees with us and it is the Treasury that is behind the cut of £20 a week from April?

Will Quince: The reason I am here today responding to this debate is that I am the Minister responsible for universal credit and this is a debate about the £20 per week uplift to universal credit. The Secretary of State is in active discussions with Her Majesty's Treasury, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and, of course, the Prime Minister about how best to continue to support the most vulnerable, most disadvantaged, lowest-paid and poorest in our society, as the Chancellor has consistently done throughout this pandemic.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): Can my hon. Friend confirm that conversations are still ongoing and that one of the reasons for that is that this does need to be fully costed because it is a lot of money? I was hoping that the shadow Minister would lay out how Labour intended to pay for the uplift.

Will Quince: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Maintaining the uplift would cost a huge amount of money—somewhere in the region of £6 billion. But it is not just about that. Throughout this pandemic, we have always looked at how best to support the poorest, most vulnerable and most disadvantaged in our society. Because this is an ever-emerging and changing situation—that is the very nature of a pandemic—we have to keep everything under review. That is why the Secretary of State, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Prime Minister do meet regularly to discuss all these issues. I want to make one further point because it was raised by the Chairman of the Select Committee: yes, we will continue the roll-out of universal credit, as we committed in our manifesto, ensuring that those on legacy benefits and working tax credits are moved across by 2022.¹

I will now turn to the specific issue of the UC uplift. The Labour party is quite simply wrong in its use of emotive language, saying that the Government plan to cut universal credit. The £20 per week uplift to universal credit and working tax credit was announced by the Chancellor as a temporary measure in March 2020. This additional support increased the universal credit and working tax credit standard allowances by up to £1,040 for a year. We took this approach in order to give those people facing the most financial disruption the financial boost they needed as quickly as possible. The agility and flexibility of the universal credit system allowed us to implement this vital increase rapidly, and

1. [Official Report, 1 February 2021, Vol. 688, c. 6MC.]

was hugely successful in giving claimants—many of whom, incidentally, had not interacted with the DWP before—a foundation by which to navigate the uncertainty of the beginning of this pandemic, and in many ways lessen the drop in earnings.

The Chancellor has always been clear that this measure remains in place until the end of the financial year. I hear the calls from Labour and, indeed, from the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds), for a decision now on whether the uplift to universal credit will continue post April, and I have sympathy with the argument that it would give claimants certainty. However, one of the evident features of a pandemic is uncertainty: if the hon. Gentleman is certain about what the economic and social picture will look like in April, then to be frank, he must have a crystal ball. The reality is that we simply do not know what the landscape will look like, which is why it is right that we wait for more clarity on the national economic and social picture before assessing the best way to support low-income families moving forward.

Why is that important? One word: agility. The poorest and most disadvantaged in our society are best served by a Government that have the agility to respond to emerging situations and the facts at the time. None of us in this House can say with any certainty what the economic landscape will be like in April, which is why we continue to work with Her Majesty's Treasury on the best way to support those in receipt of benefits.

I will add one more thing, which is that I know my right hon. Friend the Chancellor well, and I put it to right hon. and hon. Members that, throughout this pandemic, he has consistently stepped up to support individuals' jobs and livelihoods. This is the Chancellor who created the furlough scheme and the self-employment income support scheme; uprated universal credit by £1,040 this year; lifted the local housing allowance by £1 billion; protected renters from eviction; protected homeowners; gave grants to businesses; supported rough sleepers to get off our streets; funded the local welfare assistance scheme to the tune of £63 million; and set up the £170 million covid winter grant scheme. This represents one of the largest and most comprehensive support packages in the world.

Sammy Wilson: I think everyone in this House must acknowledge the work that the Government have done to try to help people through the economic difficulties caused by the response to the pandemic. However, will the Minister accept that, even with the best will in the world, he cannot say that after April, everything is going to be rosy? We know there is going to be a long tail of businesses that have been damaged during this pandemic—damaged by the lockdowns—and people, especially those at the low-paid end of the market, are going to find themselves still in need of support. Therefore, it is wrong to say that somehow or other, things are going to be rosy from 1 April, and that the level of support required by the lowest-paid in society will no longer be needed.

Will Quince: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but I do not think anybody is saying that. We are saying that the situation remains unclear, so the Chancellor of the Exchequer in particular needs the agility to be able to act on the information at the time.

My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has an unenviable task, but I repeat the point that I made just a moment ago: he has a proven track record of stepping up to support the poorest and the most vulnerable and disadvantaged throughout this pandemic, and I have absolutely no doubt that he will continue to do so. Throughout this pandemic, the Chancellor has consistently acted with the necessary agility to support and wrap our arms around those who need it. The Chancellor has always said that, sadly, we cannot save every job or every business. That is why getting Britain back to work is the relentless focus of the Secretary of State, myself and the entire ministerial team at the Department for Work and Pensions. That is key to our national recovery and is why we are investing billions of pounds to secure the economic recovery. Through our plan for jobs we are injecting billions of pounds-worth of support and have launched a range of employment schemes and programmes.

To conclude, we have demonstrated during the pandemic that this Government are committed to supporting the most vulnerable in our society and to ensuring that people have the right level of support. Through universal credit and our plan for jobs, we are supporting people of all ages to gain the right skills and experience to support them back to work. We know how quickly things can change with this virus—the new variant has led to increased challenges—but there is now also real hope from the rapid vaccine roll-out, which promises to have a hugely positive impact on the way ahead and the effort to get back to normal and to get our economy growing again. As the Government have done throughout this crisis, we will continue to look carefully at the changing impact of the virus on public health and on our economy, to help to inform how we can continue to support people and give them the tools that they need to move into the workplace so that the country can build back better after the pandemic.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. For the avoidance of doubt, the Minister has not moved the selected amendment. The question before the House remains that already proposed, as on the Order Paper.

5.12 pm

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP) [V]: I am pleased to have the opportunity to go into detail about why the SNP has been at the forefront of the campaign, led by the likes of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Save the Children and others, to keep the £20-per-week uplift to universal credit and extend it to legacy benefits.

I commend the UK Government for taking the action that they did to uplift universal credit by £20 per week. It has undoubtedly been an important step in protecting some—but not all—social security recipients, who otherwise would have fallen either into poverty or deeper into poverty during this pandemic. It was the right thing to do and it is right that it is now kept. Indeed:

“The universal credit uplift should continue for the foreseeable future. I would encourage the UK Government to make that commitment now and provide the reassurance many people are looking for.”

Those are not my words, but those of the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross), leader of the Tories in Scotland, back in October.

[Neil Gray]

What has changed since October? Both the health and the economic aspects of the pandemic have got worse. The need is still there, and I will tell the House part of the reason why. This is where I have to take slight exception to the Labour Opposition motion. It says that they want the UK Government to

“give certainty today to the six million families for whom it is worth an extra £1,000 a year.”

Although I support the motion, the uplift is worth a thousand pounds per year extra only if taken in isolation; actually, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has calculated that, if we look at cuts to social security since 2010, even with the £20 uplift, families unable to find work will receive, on average, £1,600 less per year in social security support than they would have done in 2011. That is even with the uplift. Those with children will receive £2,900 less. The contrast is even more stark for larger families with three or more children, who will lose £5,500 each year. That is part of the reason why this initiative is so important.

The UK Government seem intent on cutting the temporary uplift at the end of March, meaning that families will be a further £1,000 per year worse off. That would give the UK Government an unenviable record: if they go ahead with this cut, they will be responsible for cutting out-of-work support to its lowest level since 1992 and its lowest ever level relative to average earnings. Social security spending is normally counter-cyclical, so expenditure automatically rises during an economic downturn while revenue from taxation falls. This Government are trying to cut support during an economic downturn, when more people need greater support.

Let us remember what that means to the people who need the support: the 6 million households, in every constituency in the UK, but also the millions more on legacy benefits—disproportionately sick and disabled people—who have been cruelly denied the uplift. Last week I chaired an evidence session of the all-party parliamentary group on poverty, which I co-chair with the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake). We heard powerful testimony from two women on legacy benefits who have not benefited from the uplift. I want to read some of what Michelle told us, because it should be heard today by colleagues across the House and Ministers on the Treasury Bench, especially the Chancellor. It should be heard because when she spoke, Michelle had millions of others behind her in the same position.

“My name is Michelle and I am currently a single parent to 2 children aged 12 and 7. I have been in receipt of legacy benefits for 7 years. Prior to this I was a working woman with a career in finance, a tax payer. Due to my health issues I currently receive the legacy benefits of income-based employment and support allowance, child tax credit and of course child benefit. April 2020 saw a rise of 1.7% to legacy benefits.

Living on social security is incredibly challenging for families; it provides less than minimum expectations of living. During the pandemic those challenges have been magnified with social restrictions and home schooling. £20 sounds so little but it means so very much. I became interested in why we had not received it.

In November of 2020 I emailed my...MP about the £20 uplift and legacy benefits, she in turn enquired with the Department of Work and Pensions about the situation. I was pleased to have received a response from both, but still somewhat downhearted at how little they understood the situation.

The main recommendation from my MP and the DWP was to consider applying for Universal Credit at this time to obtain the £20 uplift. Is the suggestion that people on legacy benefits request to be migrated to Universal Credit a feasible option you might ask? For me, to risk weeks of zero income for my family would be totally impossible and have knock-on effects of missed bills and potentially surviving on whatever charity we have not already exhausted. I cannot, as a responsible mother, take that risk.

I was also informed by my MP that ‘those on legacy benefits may have benefitted from other support such as mortgage holidays and income protection schemes’. She also mentioned increases to housing allowance. I am eligible for none of these and have no options to move home—I do not qualify for a council house despite being in an overcrowded home in poor repair that I can barely afford. I cannot afford to rent nor would I likely be accepted. These suggestions are not a solution to the problems we face.

As it stands, being prohibited from accessing the £20 uplift pushes me further into using credit for everyday expenses such as the weekly food shop and utilities. Therefore I pay interest on food, heat, water, light, shoes.

So what would £20 a week, equivalent to just under a...month of benefits which I calculate at £1,040 in total (over 10% of my income), mean to my household? It is hard to pick just one thing, there are numerous options. Food is usually one of the few bills parents have the ability to reduce in hard times, so to give more food security and reduce the reliance on cheap processed food would be a big benefit. Being able to keep the house warm would help my arthritis and the asthma suffered by my son and I so that it does not flare up in the damp. I could buy equipment for home schooling, or repair the kitchen tap, or not have to rely on hand-me-down clothes from friends and family who have already a shortened life from being worn. I could afford hair cuts for all of us.

Ultimately the £20 uplift would go directly towards the health and prospects of a generation of children, my children, who have so much potential, resilience, imagination and compassion due to their circumstances and the times we live in. And all we need to do is to support their parents to get those children to a point where they can build a good life for themselves. This will not happen if for the sake of £20 they are hungry, or cold or their needs aren't met. The £20 uplift is the foundation of hope for children.”

I thank Michelle for being willing to share her experience last week and for agreeing to forward her words for me to read to the House today. They speak of what happens to families who are not given adequate support, of the difference that £20 per week could, should and would make to those on legacy benefits, and of what will be ripped away in April from those on universal credit. When the discussion opened up, Michelle went on to say that even if the health effects of the pandemic are back under control by the end of March, which is likely to be a stretch, the economic impact for families on low incomes—like Michelle's—will be felt for months, possibly years, to come.

Michelle will be paying back credit and interest on credit for months, even years, because she needed to purchase the minimum required to ensure that her children could learn at home and to pay for food and other essentials. That shows the deep holes in the social security safety net, both prior to and during the pandemic: people are relying on credit cards for food, heating and clothes—basic essentials.

As I have said in this Chamber before, the uplift and social security rates in general should not be determined by the pandemic; that should be determined by what people need to live. The Office for Budget Responsibility expects more than 800,000 people to become unemployed in the second quarter of 2021, after the job retention scheme stops again. Will living costs be any less for those households? Will it be any easier for them than it is now with the uplift in place? Absolutely not.

Social security is supposed to be there for any of us when we need it, insuring us against hard times—like the NHS when we are ill. What Michelle and millions of others are telling us is that social security is not adequate to support families, who are having to rely on credit cards to buy food, heating and clothes. By holding off taking the decision any longer, the Government are letting down those families who have no certainty, no security and no means to plan.

Instead of analysing the needs of recipients and permanently uprating universal credit and legacy benefits by £20 a week, the Government have been flying kites about providing a one-off £500 grant, but only for some. That is the UK Government trying to do as little as they can get away with in an attempt to get through a difficult political situation. That would not in any way replace the long-term security that the uplift provided and will do nothing for those newly unemployed after the grant has been applied. Making the £20 per week uplift permanent and extending it to legacy benefits is the least they should be doing, particularly as it will not even make up for the cuts since 2010.

The UK Government have a choice: make the cuts to social security since 2010 a little less worse by making the uplift permanent and extending it to legacy benefits, in turn saving many families from poverty; or cut that lifeline further, making out-of-work support the least generous that it has ever been, impoverishing millions. Today, it appears that we may not even have a vote, most probably because if we did, there would be a significant rebellion by Government Back Benchers. If Ministers do not plan to oppose the motion, they must honour it as quickly as possible. They owe it to Parliament, but, most importantly, they owe it to Michelle and the millions of families such as hers on universal credit and legacy benefits who need this help as soon as possible.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. The Opposition wind-ups will begin at 6.55 pm, the Government response will begin at 7.05 pm and the Question will be put at 7.15 pm. There is a three-minute limit on all Back-Bench contributions.

5.23 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I am pleased to be able to contribute to this debate. I am proud of the Government's response to the pandemic, supporting individuals and businesses by pumping in £280 billion of help, which the IMF and other global authorities have hailed as real and sound support for businesses and households. I was therefore disappointed to hear the Opposition spokesperson describe the £20 increase in universal credit, which has been an absolute godsend to so many during the pandemic, as turning into a cut. That is not the case, and it is important that everybody outside this place understands that.

The measures we have put in place are temporary, to support individuals and the country at large during the pandemic. Once the pandemic comes to an end and we return to some normality, of course the Government will not be subsidising 80% of employee wages, and of course the Government will not be paying businesses not to open. In the same way, we will go back to the same welfare support we have always offered; we have always made sure that those who deserve it get what they need to be supported.

If the Labour party is going to continue this extended increase in universal credit, will the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) tell us how it will be paid for? Will it be a 1% increase in income tax on everybody else who works? Will it be the axing of the £2 billion kickstart scheme, which will pay a six-month salary for those between the ages of 16 and 24, to give young people a chance to get into the workplace? Will it be the end of the £3 billion restart programme, which will provide support for 1 million unemployed people to find work? Will it be the undoing of the doubling of the number of work coaches in our jobcentres to 27,000, which would cost £1 billion? That is three items that the Opposition could axe to fund the £6 billion, or will it just be chucked on top of the national debt, which was already in difficulty but has now got out of control as a result of the pandemic? This would end up being paid for by young people, who have already suffered during the pandemic. To chuck more debt on to those young people is completely unfair and unjust.

The hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde made a personal plea to new Conservative MPs from previously Labour-held seats. I have one too: please stand firm behind the Chancellor. Since 2010, there are 200,000 fewer people in absolute poverty, with 1,000 new jobs created a day and 1.2 million fewer workless households. If we turn every single temporary extension of help into a permanent one, we will not get the Treasury delivering the temporary measures that we badly need. I support the Government, I support universal credit, and I very much hope that the Opposition will back down.

5.26 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The problem is that the Government have lost the capacity to listen—to listen to their own Back Benchers, to the all-party Work and Pensions Committee, to people claiming universal credit and to the public. That was clear in the contemptuous dismissal of my Committee's report on the five-week delay between applying for universal credit and receiving the first regular payment. The Government response to that report was published last week. In our meetings, we studied the evidence, sifted the material and listened carefully to what Ministers said in response. It is clear that the five-week delay is forcing people to food banks and pushing them into rent arrears. Social security is supposed to protect people from those things, not induce them as it does at the moment.

On a unanimous, all-party basis, my Committee recommended new starter payments equivalent to three weeks' worth of standard universal credit, to tide people over in those difficult first few weeks. The Government's response simply dismissed that recommendation and all the recommendations. Of course, the Government can reject our recommendations. They could carry out their own analysis and reach different conclusions. We recommended that the Department should do its own research on the impact of the five-week wait on food bank demand, rent arrears and claimants' mental health. The response was:

"The Department will not be conducting nor commissioning any research."

That was it. The Government do not want to know. They have lost the capacity to listen.

How can it be right that people have to wait until March to find out whether universal credit will be cut by almost a quarter at the end of March? How are

[Stephen Timms]

struggling families supposed to plan? What justification can there be for having left jobseeker's allowance and employment and support allowance unchanged? Those claiming them are in exactly the same position as people claiming universal credit. People receiving the severe disability premium have not been allowed to switch to universal credit, even if they wanted to. Why have Ministers singled out disabled people for such harshness?

If the cut goes ahead, it will push child poverty up to levels we have not seen since 1997. There is no justification for going back to £72 per week. There was one very telling point in the briefing circulated by the British Association of Social Workers: the sharp increase in children in care, up from 60,000 to 80,000, with the enormous cost that that imposes, began when the cuts to benefits began. It is a false economy. The £20 a week should be left in place.

5.29 pm

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con) [V]: The performance of universal credit during this crisis has been one of the truly stand-out successful parts of the Government's response to the pandemic. The fact that our welfare system did not topple over in the way that some had predicted is to the enormous credit of the whole DWP organisation, and not least of the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), who has spoken from the Front Bench today. When it comes to the totality of our financial response to covid-19, I would challenge anyone to point to another country where there has been such an extensive range of support to protect families' incomes. The measures that the Chancellor has put in place are historic and effective, and the evidence shows that they have reduced the impact of the crisis on those on the lowest incomes, with the poorest working households protected the most.

I appreciate that the kind of extra spending we have seen in the past year is beyond the capability of almost any Government to lock in permanently, but the question for us right now is whether the end of March this year—just 10 weeks away—is the right moment to begin unwinding this support, and specifically to remove the extra support for universal credit claimants. I do not believe that this is the right moment. I have been clear about the importance of the £20 per week uplift in supporting family incomes right at the bottom of the income scale. It is made an enormous difference to those who sadly lost their jobs during this crisis, but also to all those on the lowest wages who carried on working throughout the pandemic. We forget that more than a third of all universal credit claimants are working: they are the workers we support.

The truth is that the labour market is a horrible place for many people right now. Opportunities for people to find new work, increase their hours, boost their earnings and improve their family finances have been massively curtailed by the economic impact of the public health emergency, and that is the context for this discussion about cutting back the £20 a week uplift. That is why I believe the uplift is so important right now, and why I believe it must be extended for a further 12 months.

I am not blind to the public expenditure pressures facing the Chancellor, and I have no qualms about defending difficult decisions when they are based on a clear plan with clear justifications, but the truth is that I do not believe we have such a plan right now. There is no decision yet, even with the proposed change being less than 12 weeks away.

People need certainty about their family finances for the coming year, so I find myself in agreement with the motion before the House tonight. I want to see the Chancellor commit to a further extension to the uplift, to 12 months, to enable us to put the pandemic well and truly behind us and to provide an opportunity for economic activity to pick up and for labour market opportunities to improve. I hope that the Chancellor and the Prime Minister are listening.

5.32 pm

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): I support the motion. My constituents have felt the impact of the pandemic particularly harshly. We have seen some of the highest rates of infection in the country, and the unemployment rate has shot up almost 12%, which is double the national average. As of last August, 16,000 households in Edmonton relied on universal credit and another 11,000 households remained on legacy benefits such as employment and support allowance. Those 11,000 households have been ignored by the Government and have received no £20 uplift. The Government must reconsider that arbitrary decision.

Every week I hear from constituents who are struggling to get by, even with the uplift. The £20 may be nothing to the Cabinet or to the Prime Minister, who complained that he could not afford to live on a salary of £160,000 a year, but for thousands of families across the country, that £20 a week is the only thing that stands between them and the food bank, or being able to pay their rent or heat their home. One of those people is my constituent Sarah, who claims universal credit and has a seven-year-old child. Universal credit only just covers Sarah's rent and bills. If this cut goes ahead, she will have to choose between falling behind with her rent and staying warm. That is a choice no one should have to make.

That is why it is important to understand the uplift in context. It barely made a dent in the cuts to benefits the Government have made over the last 10 years. Even with the £20 uplift, UK unemployment and in-work benefits rank as some of the least generous in Europe. Only last week, the Prime Minister was asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) about the £20 cut. In response, the Prime Minister said that he wanted to focus on jobs, not on welfare. Can you imagine how my constituents felt, hearing such a callous reply? This is not a choice between helping people in work and helping the unemployed, because people both in and out of work are claiming universal credit. Many are in low paid work, or may be unable to work due to illness or disability.

This motion argues for a change in priorities. By making this reckless cut to universal credit, the Government will be taking money out of the pockets of the people who need us the most during the biggest recession for hundreds of years. I ask the Minister to cancel the cut and to apply the £20 uplift to the thousands of people in receipt of legacy benefits.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Apologies for the slight delay in the audio over the video, but we heard everything that Kate had to say.

5.35 pm

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con) [V]: I am proud of the incredible package of support that has been put forward by the Government to assist families and those struggling during these times. It has been as unprecedented in its scope and reach as this pandemic has been challenging. Over £280 billion has been brought forward to support people's jobs and incomes through this emergency, and the package has been praised by the IMF as

"one of the best examples of coordinated action globally".

That support includes the topic of today's debate. The uplift in universal credit amounts to £1,000 extra a year. My views on this are on the record. I am glad to stand with my colleagues in the Northern Research Group when we say that now is not the time to consider any reduction in the uplift in universal credit. This uplift was brought in to help people through the extreme challenges of the pandemic, and those challenges have not passed. Indeed, as furlough ends, we may be entering even more challenging times.

More and more people have been pushed into the category of just about managing, and more and more people are now using universal credit more than ever before. Indeed, the system and its flexibility is the unsung hero of these times, providing a safety blanket for so many. The uplift is not a handout, but rather a genuine hand up to those who need it and are trying to do the right thing. Alongside the rest of the support package offered by this Government, it has been compassionately delivered in the face of an incredibly challenging backdrop.

We have to recognise why we are here. This pandemic has fundamentally shaken society and given us reason to look again at ourselves and how we help our neighbours. The community response to covid has been remarkable. In my own constituency, the energy and dedication of local community resilience groups is something to behold. We see that same energy again in the volunteers, doctors and staff who are supporting the vaccination effort.

For all that, the virus risks taking communities like mine backwards, and we simply cannot allow the impacts of it to stretch beyond health and entrench disadvantage as well. This is even more the case as we look to recovery and levelling up post pandemic. It is absolutely right that decisions on spending are taken at the Budget—this is the normal and appropriate way of doing things—but I gently ask my hon. and right hon. Friends to consider these views carefully. The uplift is making all the difference.

Yesterday, I received an email from a constituent who had never used universal credit before and told me that she had never expected to, but she called it life-saving. This Government have done so much to support families through this crisis, but we should remember that phrase and we should be unafraid, at the Budget, of maintaining the uplift while the effect of this pandemic is still being felt. Doing so will be in keeping with the agile and comprehensive support the Government have delivered to families since the start of this pandemic.

5.38 pm

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): Today is blue Monday, when people feel at their lowest ebb, and the actions of this true blue Government will add to that despair. The Government were elected on a promise to level up, but are cutting help at a crucial time—in the middle of a pandemic, with rising unemployment and restrictions not yet lifted. People worried about their finances and pushed to the edge by covid will see how much the Tories really care today in the way they are holding this debate and in their denial about wider universal credit problems.

This system has been running for eight years, but it costs more than the legacy system and actually helps fewer people. A third of applicants last year got nothing—turned away at the point of need. It has caused food bank usage to rise dramatically, and food banks tell me that the last thing people require in their support needs is a cut from Government now. Last year, more than 300,000 people got their first payment late, and that figure will be substantially higher this year according to the Government's own figures. This is a Government whom the UN has shown have created a system that requires people to experience poverty, much of it through in-built delays to payments. Delays are not free: rent does not stop and the need to eat does not stop. The Government's solution for the people facing those delays is debt. Last year, half a million people seeking help were told they could only have a loan, with the universal credit deficit in the Department for Work and Pensions reaching £1 billion.

Extra funds are available to help, if the Government fixed the problems. The National Audit Office has shown that more than £1 in every £10 spent on universal credit is erroneous in one way or another, and the Government have not done enough to fix that problem.

In Southwark, a third of the people on universal credit are in work. The constituents I have seen include a woman whose entire first monthly payment of universal credit was £17.68. I have been helping a man whose combination of furlough and universal credit does not even cover his rent and bills. These are people required to use a food bank from my constituency office in the heart of central London.

And the Tory response to these circumstances is to cut help. It is extraordinary. We see their true blue values in the wider debate on tackling poverty—values that led to the ludicrous insinuation from the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) that Government food vouchers were being used in "crack dens and brothels", and the suggestion from his Tory colleague the hon. Member for Redcar (Jacob Young) that they were being used to buy alcohol, when they simply cannot be. More than 9,000 people in Redcar are on universal credit and deserve better representation. By contrast, their previous MP has been working in a food bank and setting up a book bank to help local children.

Then, of course, there is the Leader of the House, who has attacked UNICEF and charities helping children in Southwark. The fact that UNICEF and the UN are highlighting and seeking to alleviate poverty in Britain should shame our Government and secure action, but instead the Government attack the messenger. They pretend that their system is working, when it is failing people even with the uplift. They pretend that Labour

[Neil Coyle]

would scrap the lot, putting out trash information because the truth is too painful for them to admit. They pretend to care. If they really did, they would be hammering on the Minister's door and demanding an extension of help today, not a cut.

5.41 pm

Miss Sarah Dines (Derbyshire Dales) (Con) [V]: It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle). As a new MP, I am fascinated by the workings of this House and how Opposition day debates operate in attempts to further the political aims of the Opposition. These debates can certainly be passionate and emotive, but Opposition contributions seem at times to lack a grounding in reality, and they tend to whip up anxiety and despondency. I prefer instead to look at the details and facts—[Inaudible.] The evidence shows that the Government's measures so far through the pandemic have been truly groundbreaking. [Inaudible.]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Stop there, Sarah. We are going to do this just with the audio, so please start that sentence again.

Miss Dines: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is great to be able to see the—[Inaudible.]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Sarah, we really cannot hear you. We will now go to James Murray but will try to get you back when we know we have a much better link.

5.42 pm

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Our country went into 2021 with soaring covid infection rates, the highest excess death rate in Europe, and having had the worst recession of any major economy. Whatever happens with the vaccination programme, we face many more months of restrictions and the economic impacts will be felt for years to come. Yet the Chancellor and the Government cannot see how wrong it is to take away £20 a week from families who, having been hit by 10 years of cuts to social security and incomes, are now struggling with the extra costs of food and bills in the middle of the worst economic crisis in 300 years. It is a disgrace that today's debate is even necessary.

This cut to universal credit will hit millions of the poorest families across the country. In my constituency in west London, 44% of children are living in poverty. The cut will hit thousands of families in Ealing North, where over 4,300 households with children received universal credit in August last year, up by more than 1,800 since the start of last year.

The mother of one of those families, Clare, wrote to me on Friday night about today's debate. She kindly agreed that I could read out a few sentences from her email. She explained that

"the £20 weekly boost is such a lifeline for us, especially for my family. I am a single parent and have an autistic son who is extremely vulnerable.

I also have severe COPD and this extra amount has allowed us to buy some good reading books and nice food which we could not afford without the £20 boost.

My son needs constant care, and just for him to have the books to read gives me some free time to relax and have some time to catch up on chores, and also my sleep as my son only sleeps 4 hours max at night.

I have also been able to bake some nice meals that are nutritious where I could not afford most of the ingredients before the extra was put in place."

Families such as Clare's and others across the country need that extra help. The Government must cancel this cut, extend the uplift across legacy benefits and show that they understand the impact that their approach to social security has on people's lives.

The outbreak has confirmed how inadequate our social security system has become and how challenging it is for so many people to get by from one week to the next. The fact that the Government felt they had to increase universal credit by £20 a week at the outset of the covid crisis shows how insufficient it already was. Beyond the outbreak, we are clear that the system should be replaced with one that offers a proper safety net and decent support for all. Cancelling the £20 cut to universal credit will not right all that is wrong, but it will be a lifeline for millions as we come through this crisis.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): We will now go back to Sarah Dines; we have an audio link. Sarah, you have the full three minutes, so start right from the very beginning.

5.45 pm

Miss Dines [V]: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is nice to be able to get through at last.

As a new MP, I have been fascinated by the business and workings of this House, and by how Opposition debates operate in an attempt to further the political aims of the Opposition. These debates can certainly be passionate and emotive. Contributions from Opposition Members seem at times to lack a grounding in reality and seem to be an attempt to whip up anxiety and despondency. I prefer instead to look at the details and facts behind these debates.

The evidence undoubtedly shows that the Government's measures so far through the pandemic have been truly groundbreaking, with a range of measures worth more than £280 billion, including £6 billion in increases to welfare. In addition, there was £1 billion in catch-up funding for schools and vulnerable children, a £500 million hardship fund and £170 million to tackle food poverty this winter. It is simply untrue to characterise the Government as uncaring and as trying to plan cuts, as the motion says. As a Conservative, I believe that the way out of poverty is through work. The Government support that and have gone further than any Government, with a £30 billion plan for jobs. No past Labour Government compare.

Poverty is complex and multifaceted. It is not simply about welfare spending. It is about attainment, opportunities, addiction, social capital and mental health. The Labour party looks to an ever-increasing welfare state. I do not. I look towards supporting people to be free from the state and to work for themselves, and to supporting and catching them in a safety net when one is needed. That is precisely what the Government have done. They have supported the poorest households the most, and I am very proud of that. They have reduced

the impact of the crisis on income losses by up to two thirds. This is a fantastic achievement. The temporary emergency uplift in universal credit of £1,000 a year will be considered by the Government, and the next steps will be set out fully in the Budget on 3 March 2021. To say anything different is opportunistic.

In Derbyshire Dales, many have impressed upon me that the Government support during the pandemic has been impressive. The Government have gone further than any peacetime Labour Government. I certainly will not vote for this Opposition motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Sarah. We may not have been able to see you but we heard you loud and clear.

5.48 pm

Ruth Edwards (Rushcliffe) (Con) [V]: Ten months ago, the shutters came down on businesses across our economy. People's whole way of life changed overnight. The impact was unprecedented.

In answer, we needed an unprecedented response, and the Government delivered, as my hon. Friends have said, through a £280 billion support package. That support helped businesses across the country survive and save jobs through grants, the furlough scheme, the self-employed income support scheme and Government-backed business loans. That support helped families pay their bills and put food on the table through the council tax hardship fund, the covid winter grant scheme, increasing Healthy Start payments and establishing a £220 million holiday activities and food programme. That support gave people security over the future of their home through a six-month mortgage holiday and a temporary ban on eviction for renters.

The Government's response has been praised by international bodies such as the IMF as one of the best support packages in the world, but even that was not able to save every job, so we invested billions to help people get back into work through apprenticeships, the kickstart scheme and one-to-one coaching. We have doubled the number of work coaches and injected billions of pounds into the welfare system, boosting universal credit and working tax credit by £1,000 a year for 12 months.

The Leader of the Opposition says he wants to scrap universal credit, yet today his party is arguing to keep this temporary increase. Surely it cannot have both. Labour's proposal today would cost £6 billion per year. How would they pay for it? Would they increase income tax by 1% for 30 million taxpayers and put 5p on fuel duty? Would they increase VAT to at least 21%? Or would they raid one of our job creation schemes or existing support packages, or one of the new commitments we have already made—the commitment to increase the national living wage, worth £345 a year to someone working full time, or those to help 3.5 million families pay their council tax and to maintain the increase in the local housing allowance?

Those are big commitments, which are important to families up and down the country, including those who receive universal credit and working tax credits. It is right that we have made them and that we support people further, but how we do that should be properly considered and costed in the Budget.

5.51 pm

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab) [V]: I support the motion. The Government should hang their head in shame for leaving people on universal credit living under the shadow of a potential cut in their benefits at the end of March. We face the worst recession of any European country, to a large extent due to the Government's shambolic handling of the covid-19 pandemic. The Prime Minister's failure to provide a clear strategy, some economic certainty and the adequate financial support that millions of people desperately need is a failure of leadership and of Government policy.

The scale of this crisis is massive and growing. In my constituency of Birkenhead, I represent two of the most deprived council wards in the country. Over 12,000 of my constituents claim universal credit, a 51% increase since the pandemic began. Countless others are in receipt of legacy benefits, and joblessness continues to soar. Every day, more people join the ranks of the unemployed. Even those who have kept their jobs are struggling to make ends meet; furloughed workers are forced to survive without a fifth of their pay packet each month.

My resolve on this issue has been strengthened by the deluge of messages from my constituents. The £20 uplift is a vital lifeline; it is as crucial to people's financial health as the vaccine is to their physical health. So many constituents have told me of their fear and despair for their very survival if it is taken from them, but still the Government have refused to make the uplift to universal credit and working tax credit permanent or to confirm that it will be extended beyond April. At the same time, I believe that those excluded from the original uplift—those on legacy benefits—should also get a £20 a week rise.

Let me be clear: if, during the worst economic crisis in living memory, the Government go ahead and cut the £20 that has enabled so many people to get by, it will be a scandal. The Resolution Foundation estimates that if this cut goes ahead, the bottom fifth of earners will lose 7% of their income. Similarly, Citizens Advice predicts that 75% of the people it helps with debt issues will not be able to cover basic costs if the uplift is cut. It will mean more children going hungry, more families being unable to heat and light their homes, and more households facing the threat of eviction. It will mean human suffering on an epic scale in Birkenhead and across the country. By doing away with the uplift, the Government would take over £12 million from Birkenhead's economy, with cash-strapped families spending less in our local supermarkets and independent stores.

"Build back better"? That is a hollow phrase masking economic vandalism. We must not let this Government pave the way to a new pandemic where poverty becomes the next deadly virus.

5.54 pm

Julie Marson (Hertford and Stortford) (Con) [V]: I am proud to state clearly once more that the support the Government have provided to people and businesses during the pandemic has been unparalleled and unprecedented. It is one of the most comprehensive packages of support provided by any Government anywhere in the world, with £280 billion committed in support for jobs and incomes. The emergency response has included the furlough scheme; Government-backed loans; support for the self-employed; mortgage holidays; protection for

[Julie Marson]

renters; support for people with housing costs; and a £500 million council tax hardship fund. We extended the energy price cap, and provided a £750 million package to support charities and £1 billion in catch-up funding for schools and vulnerable children. The Government have increased the living wage, raised the national insurance threshold to boost pay, and, of course, provided a £7 billion injection into the welfare system to support millions of households.

We are the party of jobs and job creation. We know that work is the best route to recovery. We have put in place a £30 billion transformative plan for jobs to create jobs and enhance skills, because we know that work, not welfare, is the route to recovery and out of poverty. The Chancellor will make his economic announcements, including those involving universal credit, at the Budget in March. That is entirely right and proper. Long-term decisions of this nature have to be taken in the context of a range of economic levers and situations, and, of course, in the context of paying for them.

As this is an Opposition day debate, let us reflect just for a moment on an Opposition who want to abolish the universal credit system without which our welfare system would have collapsed, let alone coped with 1 million more applicants. They once told us that they would abolish boom and bust, and they opposed every measure to get the nation's finances back on a sound footing after the financial crisis. And let us not forget that it was only a little over a year ago that they were campaigning to make Jeremy Corbyn our Prime Minister and John McDonnell our Chancellor.

There is no legislative impact from today's vote and it has no bearing on policy or decision making. What my constituents need is a Government who will deliver real support and real change. That is what this Government are doing. That is what we will set out at the Budget in March.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Just a gentle reminder: please do not refer to current Members of Parliament by their names.

5.57 pm

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC) [V]: We in Plaid Cymru have called consistently for the addition to universal credit to be made permanent and for it to be extended to legacy benefits. That is the bare minimum social security response required, with so many people experiencing such hardship. Millions of people in Wales and across the UK are facing many more months of want, with no guarantee that the pandemic will be over by March when this artificial deadline is to be imposed.

The Minister said he cannot predict the circumstances in April. Neither can I. That is exactly why the certainty of the uplift should be continued. It is no surprise that the Government want to dodge yet another U-turn, having been forced to extend free school meals after the swindle of food hampers for hungry kids and all the rest of it. But for the Government to cut the vital support that universal credit provides just to save face would be morally reprehensible. The Secretary of State should have the courage to say, "The facts have changed, I have changed my mind."

If this cut goes through, over a third of Welsh households will be more than £1,000 a year worse off. This month the figure for universal credit in Arfon is up again at just shy of about 5,000; so less money for children in Arfon, and less for the basics of food, heating and clothing, piling further deprivation on to children already disadvantaged, possibly for life, by the disruption to their education. In Wales, even before covid-19, nearly a quarter of all people living in the country were in poverty, rising shamefully to three in 10 children.

The Government intend social security spending in Wales to be cut by around £250 million; less for Welsh parents to spend, but also £250 million taken out of the Welsh economy, so less for local businesses already reeling from covid.

It would be indefensible for a Westminster Government to harm the children of Wales in this way at the best of times. Doing so during the worst pandemic in memory, and after a decade of vicious austerity, is unforgivable. To lift Wales out of poverty, we urgently need the power to repair the deep cracks in our welfare system caused by years of both blue and red austerity. This deliberate cut and all the other welfare failures over decades are further proof that Westminster is not up to the job. We in Wales urgently need full powers over welfare to be devolved to our Senedd.

6 pm

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con) [V]: I congratulate the Minister for welfare delivery on his opening statement and on the work that he and his Department have done to make sure that our most vulnerable have the safety net that universal credit provides. I also take this opportunity to congratulate and give credit to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), who pioneered universal credit. It is worth repeating, as the Minister said, that if we had relied on the old system, the likelihood is that it would have fallen over during the global pandemic, so that credit needs to be recognised. Pursuing that theme, we can look back to March, when the Chancellor was so proactive and reactive to the global pandemic to ensure that our residents and constituents had the support that was necessary. These were unprecedented times and I congratulate the Chancellor on that.

In my constituency, I have 2,800 people on universal credit. That has more than doubled compared with pre-covid times. The temporary universal credit uplift was part of the armoury of support that the Government have given. One point that I want to stress to the House is that language is really important. If we as a Government and policy makers introduce things temporarily, but there is an expectation that it will be permanent, that will have a significant impact on finances.

At the Budget in just over six weeks is absolutely the right time to be having this conversation. We cannot look at policy making on a stand-alone, piecemeal basis, as the Opposition motion proposes. The £280 billion-worth of measures that have been introduced since the start of the pandemic is unprecedented. One thing that really worries me is how we will look to afford it. It is worth reiterating that we as politicians and Members of the House are purely custodians of other people's money—the taxpayers. We need to remain pragmatic, and the continued

economic uncertainty means that leaving these decisions to 3 March is appropriate. I will leave it at that, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I look forward to the rest of the debate.

6.3 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab) [V]: Universal credit has significant design flaws going back to its inception in 2012, but drastic cuts in social security spending in 2015 added to that. By the beginning of the pandemic last year, approximately £33 billion had already been cut in support for working-age people, with single parents and disabled people particularly affected.

Universal credit claimants have been driven into debt and rent arrears, and the increase in food bank demand is attributed to UC's introduction. The associated poverty is driving negative impacts on health. For example, a peer-reviewed report published in *The Lancet* last March showed that people who moved on to universal credit experienced clinically significant psychological distress as a result. Another report from *The BMJ* showed that the hostile and demeaning universal credit system worsened physical and mental health.

As the covid crisis hit, not everyone could work from home and the low-paid and vulnerable sectors, such as hospitality and leisure, have been most affected, driving the increase in UC claimants. We know that not only is this health crisis far from over, but neither are the impacts on the economy and jobs. People need reassurance that in their time of need an adequate safety net is there. In my constituency, more than half of the 14,633 claimants now claiming UC are doing so as a result of the pandemic. Many have contacted me about the debate, but not just those relying on UC have written to me, which reflects the recent poll showing that 74% of the public support the increase in UC and want to see it extended.

I chair the all-party group on universal credit, and we held an inquiry into the impact of covid on claimants last spring and made a number of recommendations to the Chancellor in November, including retaining the £20 per week uplift, as well as extending it to legacy benefits and replacing the five-week wait with an initial non-repayable starter payment.

We know from Save the Children that potentially 200,000 more children will be living in poverty if the uplift is not extended. The Resolution Foundation has estimated that by 2024 an additional 730,000 children will be living in poverty, but even if the uplift continues, people are still struggling. We know that one in five on UC always run out of money, compared with 8% of those not reliant on UC. We know that half a million people have accrued rent arrears since the start of the pandemic, with an average debt of £730. The ban on evictions also runs out at the end of March. Covid saw those already struggling to stay afloat bear the brunt of the economic and health burden. We cannot—we must not—let them down. We must extend the UC uplift.

6.6 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) for the way he set out the case from the Front Bench. The facts speak for themselves. In my constituency, 9,147 of the lowest paid people across Audenshaw, Denton, Dukinfield, Reddish and the Heatons

will be affected—people who are struggling and many who are relying on this money to get them through the current crisis.

The Trussell Trust has said that cutting universal credit could increase already high food bank use by another 10%. I will let that figure sink in. Universal credit is an in-work benefit, too, replacing the previous working and child tax credits. In that context, it is unthinkable to take £20 a week or £1,000 a year away from families. The Resolution Foundation states that the cut would see the poorest households lose 7% of disposable income. The Child Poverty Action Group states that the £20 uplift is essential

“to ensure low-income families with children receive the support they need”.

Last September, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation said that the cut risked bringing 700,000 more people, including 300,000 more children, into poverty. These are staggering and, frankly, frightening figures that should shame us all. We are better than this. We must urge the Chancellor to stop the cut and support those in need.

I know this motion has been brought to the House by the Labour Opposition, and politics dictates that we should take partisan lines—I get that those are the rules of the game, having been an MP for almost 16 years; I have seen it time and again—but this is not a game; it is millions of people's lives. It is our children's future, and sometimes we need to unite across the political divide to make a stand and do the right thing.

This political spin that abstaining deprives Labour of the opportunity to incite “hatred and bullying” towards Conservative MPs is just ratcheting up that game-playing. The only anger will be because this is not a game for 6 million families; it is real life, and the best way to remove that anger is to do the right thing and vote for the motion to stop the cut. All Members know the cut is wrong. Six million families are depending on us. I know I have represented the 9,147 who will be affected by this cut in Denton and Reddish. I oppose this cut, and I will vote against it if there is a vote tonight.

6.9 pm

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden) (Con) [V]: The last 12 months have been hugely difficult for many of our constituents as covid-19 has ravaged our communities. For those who have struggled to make ends meet, the £20 uplift has relieved pressures on household expenditure. Certainly on the Government Benches, there is not a single Member who does not want to support their constituents throughout this difficult period. That is why I consider this motion by the Labour party nothing more than a cynical attempt to score political points. Frankly, we should be above that; this issue is too important. Our constituents deserve better.

Throughout the course of the pandemic, we have seen the Government proactively provide support to those who have needed it, when they have needed it most—support measures worth £280 billion, including the coronavirus job retention scheme, £170 million to support food poverty over the winter period, a £500 million hardship fund, £6 billion in increases to welfare and £670 million to help people pay their council tax bills; along with an increase of almost £1 billion last year to increase the local housing allowance programme. This has all helped to ensure that there has been a degree of security for my constituents in their most anxious moments.

[Saqib Bhatti]

The Chancellor's packages have been recognised across the world—including by organisations such as the IMF, the Bank of England and the OBR—as world-leading and crucial to shoring up the economy and the livelihoods of those who have been worst hit by this pandemic. It is incumbent on all of us to consider the best path to economic recovery out of the pandemic for those who need it most. There is no doubt in the mind of a Conservative that a healthy economy will lessen the need for universal credit in our society. A strong economy will deliver the jobs required to give people the stability and security that they need to thrive and succeed. Nobody should consider the impact of good employment on welfare to be insignificant.

The introduction of the uplift to universal credit was the right thing to do at the time. Given the economic and social situation, I absolutely supported it. I commend the Chancellor and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions for ensuring that universal credit has worked smoothly and for supporting those who have needed it most.

Let me tell those watching who are not familiar with parliamentary procedure that today's motions are not binding. They do not change anything; they do not protect lives and they do not protect the poorest in our society. If the last Opposition day debate is anything to go by, this debate will be used by many as an excuse to abuse some of my colleagues and friends, including with physical threats—as happened last time—to themselves and their families. Such threats should be condemned across the House. I therefore believe that it is not right to engage in the Opposition's political games, not least because they want to abolish universal credit, which would leave the future for so many uncertain and reduce their support. "Gotcha" politics will not solve the scourge of poverty in our society, and the Chancellor should be given space to make the decisions that he needs to when he presents the Budget.

6.12 pm

Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP) [V]: I thank our colleagues in the Labour party for bringing forward this debate to try to provide security and reassurance to those across all our constituencies who have relied on this uplift at a time of increased costs and fewer economic opportunities.

The number of universal credit claimants in my constituency has increased by 145% in the year to November. That includes many people who have not been reached by furlough and self-employment support. The Prime Minister stated last week:

"What we want to see is jobs...and...growth".

We all do, but between covid and Brexit that is simply not a realistic solution at present. Wanting a better economic climate is not going to meet the basic needs of those on universal credit, and it ignores the fact that 40% of claimants are already in work.

The compound economic crises that we are facing are driving more people into needing the safety net of social security. For public health reasons we need more people to stay at home, but the social security net is already being found to be unfit for purpose. Existing cuts are already biting. Lone parents—just one

group—have lost around 10% of their income. One participant told the Women's Regional Consortium Northern Ireland:

"The amount allocated to us just isn't sufficient for basic living costs. We can't have the heating on because we can't afford the gas. Thank God for food banks, otherwise eating would have been much worse."

I would like to take this opportunity to recognise the work of the South Belfast food bank, as well as the churches and the sporting organisations—including Bredagh GAC, Rosario football club and Ormeau Road boxing club—which have come together to meet the need in my constituency.

Unfortunately, in 2015 Northern Ireland returned welfare powers to Westminster. I regret the fact that, despite pledges, hundreds of people are subject to benefit cuts without mitigation. I am urging the Department for Communities to bring forward legislation to stop tens of thousands more people falling into that gap, and to provide top-up payments for the two-child tax credit rule.

Medical experts make it clear that the crisis will not end neatly at the end of March. The economy will likely experience disruption throughout 2021. The uplift was the right thing for the Government to do, and I commend them for doing it, but by their own logic, there is no case for removing it now. That this change would save a lot of money is not in doubt, and I know that there are consequences to borrowing, but there are consequences here for the economy, too. The evidence shows that universal credit is spent almost immediately, so this cut would be a loss to local shops precisely when they need it most.

To finish, I will borrow a phrase from Marcus Rashford: people in poverty matter. The Chancellor seriously misjudges those people if he thinks that he can mislead them into thinking that an up-front payment is better simply than nothing. The one-off payment is an attempt to solve a political problem, but it does absolutely nothing to solve the problems of those families relying on this uplift.

6.15 pm

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): I am grateful to the Opposition for bringing forward this debate, because it gives Conservative Members an opportunity to talk about the wide-ranging and comprehensive support that we provided to the lowest-income and most vulnerable families in this country. We did so not just through the £20 universal credit uplift, but through the furlough scheme, which we know is critical to keeping that vital link to work—the sustainable route out of poverty—through the hardship fund, through the winter support grant and through the catch-up schemes. This support has been provided to the families who most need it—and in a timely fashion.

It is worth dwelling on a point that the Minister and others have made: at points during this crisis, we had 100,000 people a day applying for universal credit, yet nine out of 10 applicants were paid on time—a fact that I hope to see recognised by more Opposition Members. In that context, it is inexplicable that we would now seek to scrap universal credit, and it is worth dwelling for a second on what we inherited from the Labour Government. It can be summed up in two simple words: welfare trap. We had a welfare system that was inexplicable,

with six interacting benefits. If a person went into work, they actually lost money. There was an effective tax rate of 90%.

Jonathan Reynolds: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising that matter. The politics of the taper rate is one of the fundamental points in any welfare system. Under universal credit, the taper rate is 63%, but that does not account for income tax or national insurance, so the withdrawal rate is effectively 75p in the pound. She did not give the full picture. Universal credit, according to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, reduces the deduction rate from over 80% for some families, but it increases the deduction rate for other families. There are more families facing a deduction rate of between 60% and 80% than before, so the situation is more complicated. It depends on a person's circumstances, including the hours they work and whether they rent. Putting this in binary terms is not, I am afraid, correct. We should look at the detail, because that is what the debate deserves.

Laura Trott: The hon. Gentleman is quite right that there is a debate to be had about the right level of the taper rate, but I think we can all agree that it is better that people should want to earn more by working, and that the previous situation was worse. We have moved forward, but there is always more progress to be made, and it is important that we make progress. I think the new system is better than the last. We have a welfare system in which it pays, for the most part, to go to work. We are trying to provide a safety net, not a trap; that is the difference between now and what we had.

Today, we are discussing a complex question. The hon. Gentleman and other Labour Members will know that getting people out of poverty is more complicated than just giving them money. That is necessary, but not sufficient in and of itself. We need to provide retraining, help to get into work, and support for the whole family in the numerous challenges that they may face. It is absolutely right that this decision be taken in the round at a fiscal event, when we can think about how to look at all these things, and, crucially, how we pay for them.

The Opposition said this was not the time to think about fiscal events. We have shown that we will throw the kitchen sink at protecting the most vulnerable during this crisis, but that does not mean that we can make uncostered spending pledges. We need to think very carefully about how we deploy our money. That is not to say that a debate should not take place, but we should think about this in the context of our wider spending pledges, and in the context of making sure that we target support at the most vulnerable in society. I am very glad that, at the outset, all of us, wherever we sit in this House, recognised that we are all here to do that.

6.19 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab) [V]: For many families across my constituency who have lost their jobs and have seen their incomes fall and their costs rise, the increase in universal credit has been a lifeline throughout this crisis. It has kept them from being dragged into poverty and prevented them from joining the thousands across Bradford who, because of low pay, insecure work, high costs and under-employment, sadly struggle to get from one day to the next. Despite the benefit from this small increase, which meant families did not have to worry as much about putting food on the table, heating

their home or keeping a roof over their head, the Government are still intent on cutting universal credit from April.

I represent a constituency where half the children are growing up in deprivation, so I know just how destructive poverty can be for families, and to children's chances. It hurts their education and development, and actively harms both their mental and their physical health. I cannot be clearer about just how damaging it would be for the 13,000 households on universal credit in my constituency if the Government were to pull this small but steady foothold, which has granted much-needed financial breathing space. It would cripple household finances that have already been stretched to breaking point, and plunge hundreds of families in Bradford into a state of poverty, in which they simply would not know how to make their incomes last the week.

During what is the worst recession in 300 years, which has seen many more families who never expected to find themselves relying on universal credit dependent on the Government to get by, families need security in their incomes. I have seen an extension of the uplift described as a "splurge", a "stunt" and a "waste", but let me be clear: ensuring that people can afford to eat, keep a roof over their head and heat their home is never a splurge, never a stunt and never, ever a waste. It is a basic duty of any good Government to look after the poorest and most vulnerable in society. The decision to cut universal credit shows just how far removed from that duty this Government have become, and how they still have not grasped that it is the lowest paid and the poorest who are being hit hardest by the coronavirus pandemic.

We cannot escape the fact that there are many flaws with universal credit, but the choice for the Government today is clear: either they vote for the Labour motion and provide low-income families with certainty and security, or they choose to write off another generation and consign yet more families and children to a life of poverty and deprivation.

6.22 pm

Fay Jones (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con) [V]: I thank the staff at the Department for Work and Pensions for the way in which universal credit has stood up to the pressure of the coronavirus pandemic. In the past year, UC has supported more than 5 million households—a level of demand that would have crippled the previous legacy benefits system. An agile, targeted welfare system is of immense value to society, and particularly to the 3,000 families in Brecon and Radnorshire who depend on universal credit. I therefore firmly reject the comments of the Leader of the Opposition, who seeks to scrap universal credit altogether. Now more than ever, it is needed to support those who have been hardest hit by the pandemic.

The International Monetary Fund has commended the UK Government for their "aggressive" economic response to the pandemic, which it has called "one of the best examples of coordinated action globally".

More than £280 billion has been provided to safeguard jobs and incomes, through measures such as the furlough scheme, the self-employment income support scheme and bounce back loans. As the number of vaccinations increases, the fight against coronavirus will move to the economic front.

[Fay Jones]

There is no question but that we have a moral responsibility to ensure that the safety net is as strong as possible, but we cannot be ignorant of the cost to the taxpayer. Maintaining the £20 uplift will require a significant tax hike, which will cost anyone earning £30,000 around £175 a year, and every driver an extra 5p per litre of fuel. Universal credit is just one tool for lifting families out of poverty for good. I am proud that, rather than just giving people money, this Government are putting their shoulder to schemes such as kickstart and restart, and are doubling the number of work coaches, who give people intensive support to get back to the workplace. This is how we tackle poverty and eradicate it for good.

It is a sorry situation when in the middle of a pandemic, the Labour party uses its time sowing uncertainty and confusion. Constituents have already been in touch with me to ask whether tonight's vote will reduce the money they can expect to receive this week. I want to be very clear: it does not. The Opposition should be thoroughly ashamed of playing on the fears of those whom they seek to represent.

I will take no lessons from the Labour party on poverty. According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, even before the pandemic, one in four people in Wales lived in poverty, including 140,000 children. Welsh Labour has run Wales for 21 years, and still, in the words of the First Minister himself, we are "older, poorer and sicker", so I will take no lectures from it on poverty.

6.25 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab) [V]: The best reason to shut down food banks that I ever heard was given to me by a woman who ended up starting her own food co-operative—a mum of four. Following the Osborne benefit cuts, money was just too tight. She was advised to go to the local food bank, but when she got there, she sat outside and cried. She could not go in; she just could not do it. That is why no one in our country should have to beg for food, and why there has been public outrage about child hunger during this crisis. It is wrong.

However, today's debate is not about Marcus Rashford's child food poverty campaign; it is not about scrappy food parcels, or whether a child ought to be able to survive for two weeks on dry pasta and a loaf of white bread. Today's debate is a result of what happens if we ask ourselves why that campaign exists at all. It is a result of daring to ask the bigger question: "Why do we have food banks in our country?" If we ask ourselves what the cause of poverty is, we reach the following conclusion: too many people have jobs that pay too little, or for family reasons cannot work enough to pay for the necessities of life. This trend has been exacerbated greatly by the covid-19 pandemic, but it was set from 2010 onwards. Rising self-employment and uncertain, often low, income have undermined our battle against low pay; covid has made this a hundred times worse, and many of those facing poverty are families with only one wage coming in, or where disability affects work prospects. That is why the social security system needs to support them, and make sure the indignity of food banks is no more.

What is the truth about social security today, and why does it fail to protect? Child benefit—the most dependable, easy-to-process family support—was cut in real terms

by 22% from 2010 to the end of the decade. Proportionally, that was the largest welfare cut of all, and it fell on our children, meaning that all families with children have been squeezed for a decade. For those in low-paid work, the consequences have been severe, as we have heard from other Members. That is why we should welcome the extra money for families in this crisis, which went some way towards addressing the problems created over the past 10 years. I want the Government to go much further now, with no third or fourth child being sent the message by our country that the state does not care about them. Every child should be invested in through child benefit, and should never have to see their parents in distress because of an enforced visit to a food bank.

The contribution principle that Beveridge set up in our social security system is being undermined. We pay in when we are able and we take out when we need, but a generation is now being robbed of that promise. If the Minister does not know this, let me tell him that the anxieties we face in childhood echo on through our lives; they never leave us. That is why protecting our children is always the right thing to do.

6.28 pm

Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con) [V]: Opposition day debates are allocated to the Opposition by the Government, and in the Opposition's social media noise, they do not mention that on such days, while matters are debated and discussed, they are not decided on in the same way as they are through the ordinary legislative process. They are not backed up by White Papers or detailed policy, yet the Opposition rely on the public quite understandably not knowing the difference.

After the last Opposition day debate, my Labour predecessor dutifully posted the centrally supplied Labour attack graphics, and had to wade into the vitriolic comments under his Facebook post to ask posters to take care with their language, to which the first reply was:

"can we say Scum? Asking for a friend".

This is just a mild example of what happened as a result of the last debate—a direct consequence of the efforts of the Labour party to stoke up an emotionally charged atmosphere at a difficult time. I can cope with that bad language, but I know that colleagues faced worse, including threats that required police intervention. So I hope the Opposition will consider carefully—I heard their spokesman's comments earlier—the impact of their choice of language when they present the reality of this non-binding vote. It would also be helpful if the Opposition could present a motion that is consistent with their Front-Bench policy. Their stated aim is to abolish universal credit. What would that achieve? Chaos. Imagine if Department for Work and Pensions staff, plunged into an unexpected epidemic, had been forced to try to operate a number of different benefit schemes. The welfare system would have struggled to cope. The resilience of the system is a tribute to the sterling work of DWP staff, who have faced a challenge, stepped up and met it. I thank all the staff at the jobcentres that serve Gedling. I have been inspired by their enthusiasm over the last months.

In the last Opposition day debate on free school meals, I said that, although Labour might claim a moral victory, it did not address the fundamental issues, which

the Government had to now address. Very much the same applies today. This Government are taking action: the hardship fund; the covid winter grant scheme; the kickstart scheme; the restart scheme; millions of pounds of support for councils to help the poorest; the holiday activities and food programme; the flexible childcare fund; the furlough scheme; bounce back loans; rates relief; VAT deferrals; protection for renters; mortgage holidays; and much, much more. This is all supporting Gedling residents during these difficult times. While Labour plays on people's emotions, it offers no solutions, and this Government are offering to support the most vulnerable in society. I know they will continue to do so at the next Budget, when spending matters will, quite properly, be announced. So in this debate, the division is clear, and I know which side I am on.

6.31 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab) [V]: I wish to speak, albeit briefly due to the time available, in favour of the motion tabled by my right hon. and learned Friend the Leader of the Opposition, the shadow Work and Pensions Secretary and other hon. Friends.

Let me start by saying that at the very least the Government should rule out the cutting of this uplift in April and give certainty to families across the country. We know that the UK is in the midst of one of the most deadly global pandemics in a century and we are currently at the peak of the second wave. Twenty pounds a week is making a huge difference to the 8,306 people in receipt of UC in my constituency and to 6.2 million families across the UK. In many cases, it is making the difference between being able to put food on the table and not.

We know that times are incredibly tough. Our food banks are busier than ever, trying to support as many people as they can. In my constituency, we have a range of other voluntary organisations and community groups offering support with meals, and it is abundantly clear that families need more support, not less, although it seems that that is not clear to the Government. For them to consider this cut in the best of times would be callous, but to do it at this time, arguably the worst of times, is an absolute disgrace and plain cruel. Let us make no mistake: this cut will hit Britain's poorest households and the Government must think again.

It appears that the Government are looking to make low-income families pay as a result of the Government's incompetence and chronic mismanagement of the pandemic, which has caused Britain to suffer the worst recession of any major economy. This will make matters worse. In Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney alone, this cut will mean a £7.8 million per annum loss to the local economy. We all remember when the Chancellor said at the start of the pandemic that the Government would do "whatever it takes" to support people through this crisis. How hollow those words sound now. Not only have the Government created the worst recession in any major economy, but they are now failing to take action to stop children and families going hungry. I hope that the Minister will tell us today what it will take for the Government to get real, see sense and stop this callous cut affecting the most vulnerable families in the country.

We also know that since the beginning of the pandemic the Government have chosen to exclude people on so-called "legacy benefits", including the disabled, the

sick and carers, from the extra support given to those on universal credit—the Government said it would take too much time to update the systems needed. They have had 10 months to put this right but, instead of trying to solve one problem, they are set to go headlong into creating another, affecting millions of families. We heard examples of this from our local citizen's advice bureau just this morning. I urge all Members across the House, on all Benches, to put the needs of the most vulnerable families in the country first and to support the motion.

6.34 pm

Suzanne Webb (Stourbridge) (Con) [V]: Welfare dependency is an invidious culture that I am proud this Government do not champion, or aspire to. The universal credit uplift was always temporary. It was part of the generous package from this Government to ensure that all parts of society were supported during the pandemic.

The better conversation and debate we should have been having today is about job creation and the Government's £30 billion plan for jobs—helping people who have lost their job due to coronavirus to find new jobs, helping the over-50s bounce back quickly, helping young people into work, helping people to retrain and find new, well-paid jobs, and giving people the security of a regular income. After all, is that not the whole purpose of universal credit—giving people the means and support they need to get back into work? Never more has that been important than now.

The Government are devoting more resources to this than any Government in recent history, and I challenge anyone to say otherwise. They have delivered £28 billion of support already, the furlough scheme, £1 billion in catch-up funding for schools and vulnerable children, a £500 million hardship fund, £117 million in support to tackle food poverty this winter and over £6 million in increases to welfare. At the beginning of the pandemic, the UK economy was in a good place. That is why the Chancellor is right to wait for more clarity on the national, economic and social picture before assessing the best way to support low-income families moving forward.

Those are the conversations that my constituents want to hear, not ones of political expediency or ambiguity. On the one hand, the Opposition call for this debate, as they think the universal credit uplift should be permanent, at a cost of approximately £6 billion a year, which would mean a 1% increase in income tax for 30 million taxpayers and a 5p increase in fuel duty. Where is the financial prudence in any of that? Bizarrely, the Leader of the Opposition calls for the Government to scrap universal credit, leaving people with no means of financial or practical support to get themselves back into work. Today's debate smacks of political opportunism, with straplines that only serve to make headlines and do not help those most in need.

Where there is no ambiguity is in the simple fact that since 2010 this country has voted in all three successive elections for a Conservative leadership for this country, and there is a reason for that. It is in this Government that people can trust. This is a time to allow the Government to continue with that trust—a Government who will continue to stand behind families who need our support at the time of this country's greatest need. Getting people back into work is what will see us lift this country out of this crisis, not political opportunism and not welfare dependency.

6.37 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD) [V]: The Liberal Democrats fully support the £20 uplift to universal credit and making it permanent, and we will vote in favour of the motion accordingly. It is the right thing to do to ensure that our most vulnerable have a safety net that works for them and their dependants. It is the right thing to do to invest in our social security system and the best way to help people to escape from poverty and help stimulate our recovery. And it is the right thing to do to act now and give families certainty, rather than adopting the approach favoured by the Government, which is to leave families in the dark, in the middle of the greatest economic crisis this country has ever seen.

The coronavirus pandemic has transformed how so many people see our welfare system. People who never thought they would interact with the system are now doing so and will need to continue doing so beyond April. We should therefore not be debating whether we should take away the vital £20; we should be debating whether we can go further. Hundreds of thousands of people receive legacy benefits and many of them are unable to transfer to universal credit. They were excluded last year from the Chancellor's uplift on an entirely arbitrary basis. This group includes many disabled people and their carers. How can we leave them out of the uplift at a time that is difficult for so many? What happened to "no one left behind"? What happened to "whatever it takes"?

The Government have failed to act on this issue, and my North East Fife constituents who claim legacy benefits feel forgotten. That is why we support uplifting legacy benefits and backdating the uplift to April 2020.

It is the same story for carers. Unpaid carers are doing a remarkable and important job in very difficult circumstances. They deserve our support, but there is an historic deficit in the support available to unpaid carers. Carer's allowance is just £67.25 a week, the lowest benefit of its kind. That is why it is vital that the Government immediately uplift carer's allowance, too, in line with the uplift to universal credit. Too often, carers have been an afterthought for many politicians. It is time to stand up for them.

As more and more people access universal credit, it is also high time that we looked at the areas where it is failing to deliver. Last year, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation published a report looking at universal credit in Glasgow. The report highlighted that many people who access universal credit suffer from mental ill-health, but even more damningly, it said that even among people who did not have a mental health condition, many still suffered anxiety caused by their engagement with universal credit. The reasons include challenges in navigating the online system and a lack of face-to-face support with this, poverty and financial insecurity due to the waiting period for the first payment, the stress of managing budgets between payments, housing, conditionality and the fear of sanctions. The whole point of conditionality is to get people back to work, but right now there is simply little prospect of that. The Government have failed to suspend conditionality during the current lockdown even though they suspended it between March and July last year. On the "digital by default" approach, the majority of claimants access the system on mobile technology, and this has issues for my rural constituency.

In short, there is much work to be done.

6.40 pm

Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con) [V]: The Prime Minister has said countless times since last March, when the difficult but necessary decision was taken to fundamentally change the way we have all had to live our lives, that we as a Government would put our arms around the people of this country. The support has been phenomenal—not just financial but genuine engagement across every Department to support our most vulnerable. It is a proud record that we as Conservatives will stand on. The International Monetary Fund has said that the UK response is

"one of the best examples of coordinated action globally".

The key aim has always been to protect as many lives and livelihoods as possible, to give certainty in uncertain times and, even now, continued hope beyond this moment of incredible national achievement in rapidly rolling out the vaccination programme. When we emerge from this pandemic, it is important that we have not simply survived but have the building blocks in place to thrive again. The Chancellor of the Exchequer will be looking at the right measures at the right time, but we are not there today.

In the meantime, the extensive support has included the temporary and emergency £1,000 per year uplift to universal credit. That is just one pillar of support, but there is much, much more. We have funded local authorities to help families of all ages in difficult circumstances with the covid winter grant scheme—not just food vouchers but help with bills too. It is right that we care deeply for those who struggle most, but it is also right that we are mindful of those who sit just outside the support that universal credit offers. We are asking them to support all these measures through taxation. I look forward to hearing from the Chancellor how he will strike this important balance in the coming weeks and months. As so many have done, I wish to recognise the excellent and professional delivery of the universal credit system overseen by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, her team, and the amazing people working in jobcentres.

Let me add a gentle note on Opposition day motions, if I may. Members on both sides of this House want what is best for every member of our communities. Making political capital and amplifying social media storms sadly come with risk. Once, in October last year, could be deemed, if being generous, unforeseen; twice has the dishevelled appearance of carelessness. While the Opposition seek to cause division and worry and prey on the fearful, this Government will calmly continue to deliver.

6.43 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): We have before us today a simple motion, and I am a simple kind of guy, so I am going to be quite straightforward in indicating that I will be supporting it. It is supported by a majority of people in this country: my union, Unite, carried out a survey indicating just that. There is, however, a wider debate to be had, though not today, about values and principles. Are we a society that is accepting of homeless people freezing to death on our streets? Are we a society that is accepting of millions of people being reliant on food banks for their next meal? Are we, as a society, prepared to accept that one in three children are receiving holiday hunger hampers in the form of food parcels?

Almost 6 million families are dependent on universal credit, and 40% of them are in work; they are in receipt of in-work benefits. Government Members are accusing Opposition MPs of being partisan, but sadly, the lives of the poorest and most vulnerable people in society only seem to concern the Conservative leadership when they risk bad headlines. Government Members—and that includes the Prime Minister, the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions—must know the poverty and hardship that will be caused by failing to uprate universal credit.

At the outset of coronavirus, anticipating millions of new universal credit claimants, the Government announced a 12-month £20-a-week uplift. This was not an altruistic gift; it was a political calculation. The Minister said that he welcomed today's debate. Frankly, I do not expect the Government to change their position today, because the Government will welcome three months of uncertainty and arguing against retaining the uplift. If they were to concede today, the Opposition would have more time to focus on the national scandal of the Government's covid response. The Government are too busy making political calculations affecting the lives of more than 10,000 people in my constituency of Easington who are in receipt of universal credit.

I expect the Government will U-turn on universal credit, but it will not be today or next week. The Prime Minister should stop playing politics with people's lives and start governing in the national interest for the good of the country. He should U-turn today, consolidate the uplift and give some security to the millions of people who have been let down by this Government.

6.46 pm

Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con) [V]: Yesterday I took the unusual step of posting to my Facebook an account of what an Opposition day actually is. Usually I like to focus on local issues in Heywood and Middleton rather than process. However, after the abuse, threats and vitriol generated by the last series of Opposition day debates, I felt it necessary to get ahead of the misinformation that will doubtless follow on social media after today's debate, despite the fine words from the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds). He should consider carefully the intemperate language used by some of his colleagues in the debate so far.

People deserve so much better than political opportunism. That is why I am genuinely saddened by the tenor of today's debate, which is not just disingenuous but painfully ironic. It remains the position that the official Opposition want to scrap universal credit altogether. Whether it is furlough, covid winter grants or the stay on evictions, the schemes that the Government have put in place to support people through this pandemic have been refined and adapted to meet the changing circumstances we face, and so too with universal credit. The truth is that we simply do not know what the next few weeks hold or what the best solution will be. The responsible thing to do is to assess the situation as we approach the Budget, which is why the Secretary of State is actively reviewing next steps.

Up-rating UC represents £4.6 billion of additional spending to support those impacted by coronavirus, and the rapid roll-out of funds must, by any measure, be considered a success. Despite an almost two-thirds

increase in the number of claimants, 96% of new claimants got their full payment on time. Staff at the DWP deserve our thanks and praise, and I associate myself with reports from the Work and Pensions Committee and the House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee highlighting their successes and the fact that the digital structure of the benefit has enabled the system to withstand the sudden increase in demand, where the legacy system would have struggled severely. We know that the official Opposition want to do away with UC, despite its effectiveness during this national crisis, but we have yet to hear what they would do or, more importantly, where the money would come from. That has been the hallmark of their behaviour throughout—taking no firm positions and offering no constructive alternatives.

It is at times like this, when we are up against it, that we find out what people are really made of. I have been genuinely humbled by the selflessness of my constituents and proud of my colleagues, many of whom are learning the job as we deal with the pandemic. I am deeply saddened but not at all surprised by the naked self-interest of Opposition Members in trying to weaponise this emotive subject. Despite the veiled threat to red wall Conservative MPs from the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde, I will not be voting for this motion, because to do so would be to give the oxygen of publicity to an Opposition who, frankly, have nothing constructive to say.

6.49 pm

Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab): I find it astonishing that the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Chris Clarkson) and other Government Members do not understand the fury that has been unleashed across this country by the measures that the Government are failing to take and the callous way that they have treated so many millions of people. It is clear to me and the constituents of Ilford South that the Government should be hanging their heads in shame. They should not have even been forced to come to this Chamber or to have this debate.

This is a Government who have spent billions of pounds of taxpayers' money on contracts with friends linked to donors, and hundreds of millions of pounds on a failed test and trace system and, in my constituency, unusable personal protective equipment. It is an absolute disgrace that the Government cannot stump up an extra twenty quid to put food on the table of some of the most vulnerable people in this country.

We are in the midst of the worst recession ever. Millions of families, many in work but reliant on Government support to supplement poverty wages, are on the brink. This is not a time to let them sink below the poverty line; it is time for the Government to stick their hand in their pocket and do what is right.

Instead, the Government's cruel and callous decision will have an impact on more than 6 million families across the country, and risk plunging more than 300,000 children into poverty. In my constituency of Ilford South, more than 19,000 people rely on universal credit to make ends meet. That is more than double the national average.

Worse, that decision comes just days after we learn that the Government are only setting aside £5—five measly pounds—to feed our children. Let us be under no illusion:

[Sam Tarry]

this is an attack on Britain's workers by a Government who represent the 1% of this country, intent on cutting tax rates for their mates and handouts for the poorest.

We are struggling through a devastating pandemic and—I think that people on both sides of this House agree—perhaps the biggest challenge for our country since the second world war. Due to the unprecedented nature of this crisis, we have all had to adapt rapidly, so it is little surprise that living costs have risen in recent months. Indeed, research by Save the Children and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that 86% of families with children on universal credit and tax credits have been faced with additional costs since the crisis began.

The increase in Government support previously was rightly welcomed. It eased the burden on millions of families up and down the country. However, it will be many months, unfortunately, before we are out the other side of this awful pandemic, and millions more will lose their jobs and be at risk of unemployment when the furlough scheme comes to its end. It is completely the wrong time to end that vital piece of support.

The Government have tried to spin their one-off payment of £500 as a positive, something that so many people have seen through. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) pointed out, in real terms that means the lowest level of unemployment support for 30 years, at a time when redundancies are going through the roof.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am afraid we now have the last Back-Bench speaker, who is Jacob Young.

6.52 pm

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): This is an unprecedented crisis that demands an unprecedented level of Government support. Our Conservative Government have been there for the most vulnerable at every turn. Never have any Government in our history done so much to support those in need, with more than £280 billion spent on measures prioritising the people on the lowest incomes. While the Labour party squabbles over whether that should be £281 billion or £282 billion, our determination to help the lowest-paid and most vulnerable in our society continues.

The Chancellor, in his autumn statement, accepted all the recommendations of the Low Pay Commission and increased the national living wage, worth £345 to those who work a 40-hour week. In the public sector, we have had to take the difficult decision to freeze pay for many public sector workers, but we have again shielded the lowest-paid: those in the public sector with below the median income will see their wages rise this year by at least £250. Since 2010, we have raised the personal tax threshold to £12,500—something that benefits the least well-off the most. We have paid 80% of people's wages and provided the self-employment income support scheme designed for those earning less than £50,000. We have protected renters, helped with mortgages, and are delivering the targeted support needed to help families with their council tax, food and energy bills. We have continued to prioritise the least well-off.

Meanwhile, the leader of the Labour party characteristically offers only division and indecision. Last week, he said that he wanted more restrictions on

our economy, but he will not tell us what they could be. He has told us that he wants to scrap our Brexit deal and to do his own, but he will not tell us what that will include. Now he says he wants to scrap universal credit, but he will not tell us what would replace it.

Sadly, since the first lockdown in March, the number of people claiming universal credit has doubled. Yet the system has not fallen over under the weight of all that additional pressure, and I pay tribute to those outstanding DWP staff, especially those at my local jobcentres in Redcar, Eston and Middlesbrough, who have worked so hard to ensure that.

The Labour party can criticise universal credit and the DWP all it likes, but it knows that the legacy system it left behind would not have been able to cope with this increase in demand, and while we have invested in universal credit by doubling the number of job coaches to provide the necessary one-to-one jobseeker support that we know works so much better, it would throw it all away rather than admit it is delivering exactly on the priorities of those who need it most. Work is the best route out of poverty, which is why we have taken such extraordinary measures to protect as many jobs as we can. This Government are rising to the immense challenge presented by a crisis like no other in our history. We are all in this together, and together is how we will beat this virus.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am sorry we have not been able to fit everybody in. The debate was heavily over-subscribed, and we had a statement earlier and we do have another heavily subscribed debate, so I am now going to the shadow Chancellor, Anneliese Dodds.

6.55 pm

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker.

With our country still locked down after record redundancies and with even more anticipated, it is astonishing that the Government are still threatening family finances. Ministers could have come to this House and promised that there would be no cut to universal credit in April. They could have recognised the incredible hardship that families have faced in the last 10 months and are likely to face as we continue in the throes of this crisis. We heard the voices of many of those families today in speeches from my hon. Friends the Members for Ealing North (James Murray), for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle), for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley), for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) and for Belfast South (Claire Hanna).

The cut to universal credit is just one part of a triple hammer blow on families across the country, when coupled with the council tax rise of 5% and the pay freeze for many key workers. While today we have rightly been focused on the immediate threat to the incomes of 6 million families, we should not forget that those on legacy benefits, including the 1.9 million people claiming either form of employment and support allowance and the 300,000 people claiming either form of jobseeker's allowance, of course have not received an uplift. Those payments must be uprated in line with those for universal credit.

Those on the Government Benches opposed support for families against support for jobseekers, but their choice to cut universal credit is a political one. The past year has seen the Government spend £22 billion on an outsourced test and trace system that still is not delivering. A quarter of that cost has been estimated as the cost for a continuation for a whole year of the support for families that we are debating today. This comes from a Government who have spent monumental amounts wastefully on goods and services that simply have not worked: £150 million on face masks that could not be used; £16 million on antibody tests that did not work; and £12 million on an app that had to be scrapped. The list goes on and on, as intimated by my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Sam Tarry).

Instead of tackling waste and mismanagement, our Government are targeting families, with the worst-off fifth of households in our country facing what the Resolution Foundation has described as an “almost unimaginable” 7% hit to their disposable incomes if the Government continue on this path. Cutting £20 a week from universal credit is a political choice to make ordinary families carry the can for this Government’s mistakes, as my hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) rightly put it.

There are rumours that the Chancellor is considering a one-off payment of either £500 or £1,000 instead of maintaining the £20 per week uplift. If those payments take place at the beginning of April, people would miss out if they were affected by the end of the furlough scheme in April, so if someone loses their job on 30 March, they would get £1,000 more to see them through than if they lose their job just a month later. There can be no economic justification for this approach. Furthermore, at times during this pandemic we have had 200,000 new claimants coming on to this system in a single month. A one-off payment simply will not work.

I want to make it clear that I and the Opposition have no truck with those who abuse Government Members for their opinions or threaten them. We wholeheartedly condemn that behaviour and it has no place in our democracy, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) made crystal clear.

The Prime Minister’s spokesperson described our debate as a “political stunt”, and other Members on the Government Benches echoed him. However, when the Conservative party was in opposition, it did not consider debates such as these to be stunts, and nor did the then Labour Government. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), in one of many exceptional speeches today, put his finger on the problem: the Government have lost the capacity to listen. They need to ask themselves why a number of their own Members, from the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokehire (Stephen Crabb) to the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (Simon Fell), called again today for the Government to look at the issue and to retain the uplift during this crisis.

The Resolution Foundation has shown how the cut, combined with rising unemployment, would lead to the biggest year-on-year rise in poverty rates since the 1980s, and to a rise in absolute, as well as relative, poverty. My hon. Friends the Members for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) and for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) rightly highlighted the impact of

that on child poverty in particular. The cut is morally untenable, but it is also economically nonsensical. What the UK needs as we come out of this crisis is confidence—confidence that the Government have got a grip on public health, but also confidence that people can afford to spend, to go out on to our high streets and into our small businesses. This cut shatters the confidence of those who are far more likely to spend than those who are better off. The cut also ignores the high long-term costs of poverty, as underlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern). As my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham highlighted, this is a false economy.

Finally, I regret that I have to mention this, but yet again we saw Conservative Members pitting universal credit claimants against working people. Universal credit is an in-work benefit. It does not take money from everybody else who works, as the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) suggested, and it should not be pitted against getting Britain back to work, as the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and the hon. Members for Derbyshire Dales (Miss Dines) and for Stourbridge (Suzanne Webb) maintained. My hon. Friends the Members for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) and for Easington (Grahame Morris) were absolutely right to point to the impact on claimants of such false comparisons.

The proposed cuts will disproportionately impact those in the north of England and in Wales. It is bad enough that one in five non-pensioner households in the south-east will be hit by these cuts, but in the north-east, Yorkshire and the Humber, Wales and the west midlands it will be more than one in three households. The Chancellor might want to learn the lessons of his predecessor. George Osborne also thought he could cut an average of £1,000 a year from families’ incomes. It took just over a month for him to see the error of his ways and back down. Mr Osborne’s cuts would have affected 3.3 million working families. The current Chancellor plans a hammer blow to nearly double that number—6 million families—across the country. Month after month, he has stubbornly ploughed ahead, ignoring the economic evidence, even ignoring two former Conservative Secretaries of State for Work and Pensions.

The Minister stated in his opening speech that the Secretary of State was in active discussions with the Treasury. On the Labour side, our DWP and Treasury teams have already had those active discussions. We decided to prioritise families and our economic recovery, and we are doing something about it today. For all the talk of wanting to address inequality in this country, here is a policy choice from the Conservatives that would see one in four people—and one in three children—in relative poverty by the end of this Parliament. Instead, our Government should be focused on securing our economy, protecting our NHS and rebuilding Britain. Cutting a financial lifeline for 6 million people will not secure our economy. Enacting a policy that will plunge families into hardship, widen regional inequalities and make working people carry the can for the Government’s mistakes is no way to rebuild Britain. It is not too late for Government Members to do the right thing. I urge them to vote with us today and send a clear message to millions of families that their elected representatives hear them and are on their side.

7.4 pm

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Steve Barclay):

It is a privilege to close this debate on behalf of the Government. Let me begin by thanking right hon. and hon. Members across the House for their contributions. Many spoke with great passion. Having listened to the debate, it is clear to me that there is a heartfelt desire, shared on both sides of the House, to support those constituents impacted by the economic consequences of covid. That was reflected in the well-measured opening remarks of the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds), speaking from the Opposition Front Bench, and in the comments from my hon. Friends the Members for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott), for Barrow and Furness (Simon Fell) and for Guildford (Angela Richardson), among many others.

The Government are acutely aware of the harm that the crisis has done to people's finances, including the most vulnerable in our society. At every stage of the pandemic, we have striven to support those who have found themselves at the sharp end. As the Minister for welfare delivery, my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), outlined earlier, that is why we introduced a wide-ranging package of welfare measures worth over £7 billion this year. That included temporarily increasing the universal credit standard allowance and the working tax credit basic element by £20 a week—an increase that has boosted welfare spending by £6.1 billion. As my hon. Friend also pointed out, given the evolving nature of the pandemic, it is right that we wait until the Budget before making future tax and welfare decisions.

Stephen Timms *rose—*

Steve Barclay: I will of course give way to the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee.

Stephen Timms: Is it not unreasonable to force families who claim universal credit to wait until March to find out whether the rate of benefit will be cut by nearly a quarter at the end of March? Surely the Government need to announce their decision sooner.

Steve Barclay: I think what that ignores is that a quarter of the scheme is still to run, because there is still almost three months until the end of the financial year.

One should look at the package of measures as a whole. As a number of right hon. and hon. colleagues have pointed out, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has allocated £280 billion in fiscal stimulus to help weather this crisis—I think the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee has welcomed a number of these measures. As was further pointed out during the debate, and as Treasury analysis supports, the measures have overwhelmingly supported the poorest families most and reduced losses for working households by up to two thirds. That point was elegantly expressed by my hon. Friends the Members for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), for Meriden (Saqib Bhatti) and for Redcar (Jacob Young)—he correctly identified that the scale of Government support has been praised by many international observers, including the IMF, which has singled out the UK's performance.

Let me briefly remind the House of some of the key elements of that support that relate most closely to this debate. The furlough scheme has protected the jobs of

almost 10 million people, many of whom are on low incomes. Over 3 million people have benefited from self-employment grants. In addition to the temporary uplift in welfare payments, we have suspended the universal credit minimum income floor and increased the local housing allowance rates for housing benefit and universal credit.

We have also supported those on low incomes through other measures, including council tax relief through the £500 million hardship fund, and the £500 payments for people on low incomes who have to self-isolate. Our covid winter support package includes the £170 million covid winter grants scheme and a £220 million expansion of the holiday activity and food programme for disadvantaged children. Those points were made during the debate, including by my hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Ruth Edwards). These measures have provided financial support to millions of families and individuals.

Beyond the state help that those measures have enabled, there can be no doubt that the best way to raise living standards is to keep as many people in work as possible and to support their wages. That is why my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has focused on our pledge to end low pay by increasing the national living wage by 2.2% to £8.91 an hour. Indeed, he has gone further, protecting, creating and supporting employment through our £30 billion plan for jobs—a point that my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge (Suzanne Webb) brought to the House's attention very effectively. Measures including the furlough scheme, along with a raft of other initiatives designed to get people into work, have boosted jobcentre capacity, doubling the number of work coaches, and sit alongside measures such as the new £2.9 billion restart programme to help over 1 million unemployed people back into work.

As well as helping people to find jobs, we are creating new ones through a range of policies. They include our £8.6 billion investment in infrastructure, decarbonisation and maintenance programmes, and our £2 billion kickstart scheme for young people. Over the long term, we plan to unlock 250,000 highly skilled sustainable jobs that will boost our recovery under the Prime Minister's 10-point plan for a green industrial revolution.

I have set out to the House the scale of support we are providing to people in this crisis, as well as our commitment to helping the most vulnerable and those on low incomes. Let me add that it would not have been possible to provide that support without the dedication of thousands of workers in the Department for Work and Pensions and on the frontline in jobcentres around the country. Let me echo the remarks of the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester, the Minister for welfare delivery, by pointing out how well the universal credit system has coped with the enormous increase in claimants over the past months, a point recognised quite rightly by my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb), my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Fay Jones)—I am sure colleagues will join me in wishing her a happy birthday—and my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Tom Randall).

Despite immense pressures, payments have still been issued swiftly and efficiently to millions of people through the universal credit system. It is clear that every Member

of this House is concerned for the financial wellbeing of families and individuals in their constituencies and across the country. That has been reflected in the remarks from all sides of the House during the course of the debate. The Government, too, are acutely aware of the challenges people face. That is why we have spent £280 billion in response to covid, reflecting the Government's and the Chancellor's commitment to support individuals, businesses and our public services. As such, we will not move an amendment to this motion.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 278, Noes 0.

Division No. 197]

[7.12 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane	Creasy, Stella
Abrahams, Debbie	Cruddas, Jon
Aldous, Peter	Cryer, John
Ali, Rushanara	Cummins, Judith
Ali, Tahir	Cunningham, Alex
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena	Daby, Janet
Amesbury, Mike	Davey, rh Ed
Anderson, Fleur	David, Wayne
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Davies, Geraint
Ashworth, Jonathan	Davies-Jones, Alex
Bardell, Hannah	Day, Martyn
Barker, Paula	De Cordova, Marsha
Beckett, rh Margaret	Debbonaire, Thangam
Begum, Apsana	Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Benn, rh Hilary	Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Betts, Mr Clive	Dodds, Anneliese
Black, Mhairi	Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Blackford, rh Ian	Doogan, Dave
Blackman, Kirsty	Dorans, Allan
Blake, Olivia	Doughty, Stephen
Blomfield, Paul	Dowd, Peter
Bonnar, Steven	Dromey, Jack
Brabin, Tracy	Duffield, Rosie
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Eagle, Dame Angela
Brennan, Kevin	Eagle, Maria
Brock, Deidre	Eastwood, Colum
Brown, Alan	Edwards, Jonathan
Brown, Ms Lyn	Efford, Clive
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas	Elliott, Julie
Bryant, Chris	Elmore, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen	Eshalomi, Florence
Burgon, Richard	Esterson, Bill
Butler, Dawn	Evans, Chris
Byrne, Ian	Farron, Tim
Byrne, rh Liam	Farry, Stephen
Cadbury, Ruth	Fellows, Marion
Callaghan, Amy	Ferrier, Margaret
Cameron, Dr Lisa	Fletcher, Colleen
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Flynn, Stephen
Campbell, Mr Gregory	Fovargue, Yvonne
Carden, Dan	Foxcroft, Vicky
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Foy, Mary Kelly
Chamberlain, Wendy	Gardiner, Barry
Champion, Sarah	Gibson, Patricia
Chapman, Douglas	Gill, Preet Kaur
Cherry, Joanna	Girvan, Paul
Clark, Feryal	Glindon, Mary
Cooper, Daisy	Grady, Patrick
Cooper, Rosie	Grant, Peter
Cooper, rh Yvette	Gray, Neil
Corbyn, rh Jeremy	Green, Kate
Cowan, Ronnie	Greenwood, Lilian
Coyle, Neil	Greenwood, Margaret
Crabb, rh Stephen	Griffith, Nia
Crawley, Angela	Gwynne, Andrew

Haigh, Louise	McMahon, Jim
Halfon, rh Robert	McMorrin, Anna
Hamilton, Fabian	Mearns, Ian
Hanna, Claire	Miliband, rh Edward
Hanvey, Neale	Mishra, Navendu
Hardy, Emma	Monaghan, Carol
Harman, rh Ms Harriet	Moran, Layla
Harris, Carolyn	Morden, Jessica
Hayes, Helen	Morgan, Stephen
Healey, rh John	Morris, Anne Marie
Hendrick, Sir Mark	Morris, Grahame
Hendry, Drew	Murray, Ian
Hill, Mike	Murray, James
Hillier, Meg	Nandy, Lisa
Hobhouse, Wera	Newlands, Gavin
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret	Nichols, Charlotte
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon	Nicolson, John
Hollern, Kate	Norris, Alex
Hopkins, Rachel	Offord, Dr Matthew
Hosie, Stewart	O'Hara, Brendan
Howarth, rh Sir George	Olney, Sarah
Huq, Dr Rupa	Onwurah, Chi
Hussain, Imran	Oppong-Asare, Abena
Jardine, Christine	Osamor, Kate
Jarvis, Dan	Osborne, Kate
Johnson, Dame Diana	Oswald, Kirsten
Johnson, Kim	Owatemi, Taiwo
Jones, Darren	Owen, Sarah
Jones, Gerald	Paisley, Ian
Jones, rh Mr Kevan	Peacock, Stephanie
Jones, Ruth	Pennycook, Matthew
Jones, Sarah	Perkins, Mr Toby
Kane, Mike	Phillips, Jess
Keeley, Barbara	Phillipson, Bridget
Kendall, Liz	Pollard, Luke
Khan, Afzal	Powell, Lucy
Kinnock, Stephen	Qureshi, Yasmin
Kyle, Peter	Rayner, Angela
Lake, Ben	Reed, Steve
Lammy, rh Mr David	Rees, Christina
Lavery, Ian	Reeves, Ellie
Law, Chris	Reeves, Rachel
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma	Reynolds, Jonathan
Lewis, Clive	Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Linden, David	Rimmer, Ms Marie
Lloyd, Tony	Robinson, Gavin
Lockhart, Carla	Rodda, Matt
Long Bailey, Rebecca	Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Lucas, Caroline	Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Lynch, Holly	Shah, Naz
MacAskill, Kenny	Shannon, Jim
MacNeil, Angus Brendan	Sharma, Mr Virendra
Madders, Justin	Sheerman, Mr Barry
Mahmood, Mr Khalid	Sheppard, Tommy
Mahmood, Shabana	Siddiq, Tulip
Malhotra, Seema	Slaughter, Andy
Maskell, Rachael	Smith, Alyn
Matheson, Christian	Smith, Cat
Mc Nally, John	Smith, Nick
McCabe, Steve	Smyth, Karin
McCarthy, Kerry	Sobel, Alex
McCartney, Jason	Starmer, rh Keir
McDonagh, Siobhain	Stephens, Chris
McDonald, Andy	Stevens, Jo
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm	Stone, Jamie
McDonald, Stuart C.	Streeting, Wes
McDonnell, rh John	Stringer, Graham
McFadden, rh Mr Pat	Sultana, Zarah
McGinn, Conor	Tami, rh Mark
McGovern, Alison	Tarry, Sam
McKinnell, Catherine	Thewliss, Alison
McLaughlin, Anne	Thomas, Gareth

Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thompson, Owen
Thomson, Richard
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twist, Liz
Vaz, rh Valerie
Webbe, Claudia
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan

Whitford, Dr Philippa
Whitley, Mick
Whittome, Nadia
Williams, Hywel
Wilson, Munira
Wilson, rh Sammy
Winter, Beth
Wishart, Pete
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Bambos Charalambous and
Jeff Smith

NOES

Tellers for the Noes:

John Spellar and
Gill Furniss

Question accordingly agreed to.

The list of Members currently certified as eligible for a proxy vote, and of the Members nominated as their proxy, is published at the end of today's debates.

Resolved,

That this House believes that the Government should stop the planned cut in Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit in April and give certainty today to the six million families for whom it is worth an extra £1,000 a year.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. My apologies to the right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar) and the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) for not being able to give them prior notice of my point of order because they were on telling duty. I was concerned, at the calling of that Division, that the advent of face masks in the Chamber may have disguised a member or two of the Opposition Whips Office shouting opposition to their own motion, thus rendering redundant the idea that the vote should follow the voice. Could you advise me further on that, Madam Deputy Speaker?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point of order. Nothing disorderly has happened. There was a shout of "Aye" and a shout of "No", and Tellers were put in when I put the question again. I am sure that he is not questioning my judgment. Nothing disorderly has happened, and the vote took place in the proper manner.

I will now suspend the House for three minutes in order to enable the arrangements necessary for the next business to be made.

7.24 pm

Sitting suspended.

Remote Education and Free School Meals

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I inform the House that Mr Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

7.27 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House believes that families need more support during school and college closures; and that those eligible should be guaranteed to receive the full value of free school meals for the duration of the school year, including during all holidays; and calls on the Secretary of State for Education to set a deadline to ensure that every learner has the resources required to learn remotely, and provide a weekly update to Parliament on implementing this.

Today, and at least until February half-term, millions of children have not attended school and will instead be studying at home. No one wants to be in this situation—we all believe that school is the best place for children's learning and wellbeing—but for now, faced with a rising coronavirus infection rate, we understand that many children need to study at home. They, their families and hard-working school staff deserve to know that the Government are doing all they can to support them.

That is why we have brought forward a motion this evening that asks two fundamental questions: first, are the Government doing everything they can to support pupils to keep learning remotely; and secondly, are the Government doing everything they can to ensure that children do not go hungry when they cannot get a free meal in school? If the answer to those questions is no, which I believe it is, then Members, whatever their party, should vote for our motion.

These should be matters on which we can all agree. I am sure there is nobody in this House who does not believe that children should receive a world-class education and that every family in this country should be able to provide their children with nourishing meals, but the reality is that the Government have not done enough—too slow to secure digital access for those who need it, while overseeing yet another scandal in delivering free school meals to children in need of them. The Prime Minister and, indeed, the Secretary of State claimed to be outraged by images of food parcels they saw on social media last week, but I and my party are outraged at Ministers' consistent and unforgivable failure to stand with children and families throughout this pandemic. Pupils and parents deserve a Government who are on their side. They deserve better than this Government.

I pay tribute to everyone who has gone above and beyond to keep children safe and learning throughout the pandemic—the teachers, leaders and support staff across our education system who have worked hard in extraordinary circumstances to keep children learning safely; and the parents who face the unenviable task of balancing work, educating their children and childcare, too often without the support they need.

At the beginning of this pandemic, 1.8 million children did not have the devices or internet connections they needed to work from home and, in that first national lockdown, many of those children struggled to access remote learning. Despite the best efforts of teachers, school leaders and support staff, some children fell behind their peers because they lacked the basic resources

to continue learning when they could not be in the classroom. The Secretary of State rightly started to provide some devices to some of those children. He set a target of providing 230,000 devices by the end of June last year. Not only did that fall far short of the number of children who needed them, but he did not even deliver all those devices on time. Perhaps he could have learned a lesson from the Labour Government in Wales, which repurposed existing orders and were supporting pupils with devices by the end of May, according to the independent Education Policy Institute.

Being less prepared than the Welsh Labour Administration may have been understandable at the beginning of the pandemic, but the Secretary of State's inability to learn from his failures and from their success is inexcusable. Instead of redoubling his efforts to get devices to all the pupils who lacked digital access as quickly as possible, the Secretary of State waited until the new national lockdown this month to up his target and accelerate delivery, leaving hundreds of thousands of pupils not only out of the classroom, but out of learning. So I ask him: why were these laptops not being rolled out on this scale months ago? Why was he once again too slow to act to secure children's education in the face of huge disruption?

Today, we have reached about 700,000 devices delivered against a target of 1.3 million. It does seem that the Secretary of State is finally beginning to learn from at least one of his mistakes. This time, he has decided not to set himself a deadline that he will simply miss, but he cannot shy away from his duty to those children, so can he tell the House now when all the devices will be in the hands of the pupils who need them? Can he guarantee that when that is done, every single child who was locked out of remote learning will be able to participate fully when they are not in the classroom?

This is not just an issue in schools. In colleges, we have heard of adult learners struggling to access remote learning and not being eligible for Government support. Universities UK, ucisa, GuildHE and Jisc have written to the Secretary of State in just the last few days to request urgent action to support the thousands of university students who are still unable to access their education online due to digital and data poverty. Will he tell us what he is doing to address this?

I would like to move to the second part of the motion on free school meals. The images of food parcels that we saw last week were scandalous. Ministers have said that they are outraged by them, but they refused to accept that responsibility for those images is a direct result of their own policies. They pushed for a food parcel-first approach and set guidance for parcels worth only a fraction of the £15 made available to providers for families to feed their children. They cannot devise and publish a policy and guidelines and then be appalled when they are implemented. Will the Secretary of State now take responsibility for what occurred and apologise to the parents who received those unacceptable food parcels?

The Secretary of State then managed to outdo himself, with not just one but two free school meals scandals last week. Only days after we all saw those images, it was reported that schools will not be providing free meals over the February half term. Of course, the Secretary of State voted against such a measure in October. We thought he had learned his lesson, but now he is letting

down hungry children again. I know that he will cite the winter support scheme, but that scheme does not guarantee that every child eligible for a free school meal will get one every day of the holidays, and he cannot guarantee that no child will go hungry when they are out of school this half term.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): I am listening to the hon. Lady carefully. I am sorry that she has not picked up the tone of her shadow DWP colleague, the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds)—he got the tone right; she has not—but does she agree that there is clearly a long-term conversation to be had in this country about school holiday food for families in receipt of free school meals? It is something that never happened during the 13 years of the last Labour Government and that, to my knowledge, the Opposition have not pushed this Government on during the last almost 11 years of their being in office. Does she agree that there is a conversation to be had, sensibly, across the Dispatch Box and without the partisan nonsense, about the long-term provision of holiday food for some of the poorest children in our country?

Kate Green: I am aware that a number of organisations, representing food charities, anti-poverty organisations, educationalists and so on, have written to the Prime Minister suggesting a full review of that subject. I welcome that, and I hope that he will respond with the offer of the review that they are seeking. However, I point out that not only are we in the middle of the first global pandemic in 100 years, but that it is against the backdrop of rapidly rising child poverty. That is why the push to address the hunger that children are facing now has become more acute than ever.

I have a simple solution for the Secretary of State to the problem of holiday hunger, one that could solve the problem at the touch of a button: sack the companies that are providing a substandard service and just give parents the money—secure family incomes by using the existing social security infrastructure and put £15 a week into the bank accounts of the parents who need it to feed their children. He should put his trust in mums and dads, because we know that parents will do the right thing.

Anyone who has thought about these issues—I do not know about Government Members, but I have spent a large part of my career thinking about them—knows that cash transfers work. They improve outcomes for children, they remove stigma for families and they ensure that the full value of support provided goes to children. I know that there are some people—in October we discovered some of them on the Government Benches—who believe that parents cannot be trusted to use money responsibly to feed their children. That is wrong in every possible way. It is morally wrong to condemn families to insecurity and stigma. It is economically illiterate not to provide cash to families who most need it, and instead to slash their incomes in the midst of the worst recession that most of us will know in our lifetimes. And it is factually and empirically wrong to suggest that this money would not be spent by parents on food for children. So I ask the Secretary of State to do the right thing: to end the scandal of inadequate food parcels or vouchers that take days to arrive, and the scandal—in one of the richest countries in the world—of children continuing to go to bed hungry.

[Kate Green]

I want to turn briefly to the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister. Let me begin by saying that there are some things in the amendment that I am glad to see—not least that he has finally listened to teachers and to Labour and started to move towards zero rating of educational websites, though quite why it has taken him so long, I do not know. First, the amendment asks us to note that the Government are

“committed to supporting families to feed their children during both term-time and holidays”.

It then mentions a voucher scheme that has been hit by repeated delays in an outsourcing fiasco, a winter grant scheme that cannot guarantee that every child will be fed and a holiday scheme that will not be in place for months. It condemns the food parcels we saw on social media, while failing to take any responsibility for the fact that they were in line with the Government’s own policies. It ignores the Government’s plans to slash more than £1,000 a year from family incomes by cutting the lifeline in universal credit, plunging hundreds of thousands of children into poverty.

Then the amendment calls on us to note all the progress the Secretary of State has made in improving digital access. It lauds his half-delivered target of delivering 1.3 million laptops yet gives us no clear timeline for full delivery. It notes the support given to schools but ignores the fact that schools up and down the country have repeatedly reported that they have not had the support they needed from the Government throughout the pandemic, whether it is on funding, testing, exams—the list continues. I am afraid the amendment is not credible. In fact, it is insulting to schools and families across the country, who will see through this attempt to give Government Members something to vote for while failing to support the entirely reasonable motion we have tabled.

Poverty is, sadly, endemic across our country. In every city, town and community, it blights the life chances of children, causes unimaginable hardship and insecurity to families, and weakens our economy. The pandemic has made the situation far, far worse, and it is appalling that today, we have seen with our own eyes that the Government are simply not committed to the task of ending child poverty.

Earlier this evening, Government Members failed to support Labour’s motion calling for the £20 uplift in universal credit—a lifeline that has kept millions above water over the past nine months—to be made permanent. The consequences are simple: families and children will be plunged into insecurity, hardship and poverty. I am giving Government Members a second chance to do the right thing this evening and to put children first by voting for our motion—a motion that asks for nothing more than the chance for every child to learn and for no child to go hungry.

7.43 pm

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson): This Government have been engaged in a monumental battle to manage the effects of the coronavirus pandemic, to protect the NHS and to save lives, and also to minimise the damage that this ongoing disruption is causing to a generation of young people’s lives. This is not a challenge faced by this country alone; it is a challenge faced by nations right across the world.

On 5 January, escalating rates of covid infection once more forced us to ask schools to close their doors to the majority of pupils for the second time in less than a year. This is not a move that any of us in the House—certainly not on the Government Benches—wanted to see. So much learning has been lost already, but we know that one of the most effective ways of reducing the impact of being out of school is through high-quality remote education. I am glad to say that we are in a much better place than we were last March for minimising the worst effects of this disruption. School and college teachers and leaders have quickly adapted once more to delivering a mix of online and face-to-face instruction. I thank them once again, as I am sure all in this House want to, for the brilliant way that they have responded to the evolving health situation.

Last year, a group of 40 teachers founded and launched the Oak National Academy, with not just our moral support, but, more importantly, financial support from the Department for Education. It was a new venture that many people said could not or would not work, but in two weeks flat, it was able to produce thousands of high-quality, teacher-led video lessons with £4 million of Government funding. It now has 3.8 million users, and 32 million lessons have been viewed—not just in England, but in all four nations of the United Kingdom.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend also note that the Oak National Academy today launched its virtual library, and congratulate all those who have taken part? It means that our children can be not only learning, but reading, which is so important—and this comes as we relaunch partly the all-party group on literacy tomorrow.

Gavin Williamson: I echo what my hon. Friend said about the importance of the expansion of services at the Oak National Academy, and of encouraging the ever-greater availability of resources on this brilliant platform. I certainly wish him the very best with the new all-party group.

Online learning is a critical means of helping children and young people make the academic progress that they so desperately need at this time. Now that most children and young people are studying remotely, we have increased our expectations of the remote education that they receive. Schools have made huge progress in developing their remote education provision, and are now expected to provide either recorded or live direct teaching, alongside allowing pupils time to complete independently work that they have been set. Schools are now expected to provide a minimum of three hours’ provision a day for key stage 1—it is fewer hours for younger children—four hours a day for key stage 2, and five hours a day for key stages 3 and 4. Schools should also have a system in place for checking daily whether pupils are engaging actively with their work and learning.

We have set out clear, legally binding requirements for schools to provide high-quality remote education, and it is fantastic to see how schools and teachers have risen to the occasion, delivering a real step change in the standard of remote education compared with last spring.

Further education colleges are expected to continue to deliver as much of students’ planned hours as possible, to provide students with regular feedback on their progress and, wherever possible, to provide them with live online teaching when they cannot provide it face to face.

My Department is acutely aware of our huge responsibility to all our children, but none more than those who are socially and economically disadvantaged. We made it a priority to deliver the necessary technology to children in that position very early on in this pandemic, and I am glad to be able to give colleagues an update. Prior to the pandemic, there were an estimated 2.9 million laptops and tablets already in schools' stock. In March, we began the process of finding a supplier who could deliver hundreds of thousands of computers for disadvantaged children. In April, we awarded Computacenter a contract for an initial 220,000 computers. We extended our commitment in August by a further 150,000, and did so again in September, and in October. By December, we had procured and delivered 560,000 laptops and tablets. In November, we ordered an additional 340,000 devices, bringing our total procurement to 1 million laptops and tablets. This has been one of the world's largest procurements of laptops and tablets, and it has happened despite intense global demand.

Notwithstanding the million laptops or tablets commitment, we wanted to go further, and this year we have already ordered a further 300,000 devices on top of our current order. Already, three quarters of a million computers are in the hands of schools and disadvantaged young people. All this is in addition to the 1.9 million laptops and 1 million tablets that schools already have, most of which can be lent out to those pupils who need them most.

The latest 300,000 devices lift our investment in online learning by another £100 million, meaning that more than £400 million has been invested in supporting disadvantaged children and young people who need the most help and support with access to technology through the pandemic. The 16-to-19 bursary fund was another, existing means of supporting disadvantaged learners in schools and further education settings. As for adults, we introduced a change to the Education and Skills Funding Agency adult education budget last July, so that the most disadvantaged adult learners could continue to join courses that have moved online because of the virus. We have extended the "Get help with technology" scheme, in order to provide disadvantaged 16 to 19-year-olds with further help with devices.

I have concentrated so far in this debate on making clear how we are doing everything we can to ensure all our young people can continue to learn from home during the latest lockdown. However, no child can do their best if they are hungry, and I emphasise clearly, so that there is no doubt whatever, the Government's commitment to free school meals.

I want to stress that the overwhelming majority of schools have been successfully providing exceptionally high-quality free school meal support to their pupils. However, pictures were circulated last week of food parcels that were simply not acceptable. Along with the Minister for children, my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), I have met those who are supplying these parcels, and I have left them in no doubt that we expect high-quality food and supplies in the parcels they deliver. Our guidance states that the parcels need to contain certain items that parents can use to make a healthy lunch for any child throughout the week.

Gary Sambrook (Birmingham, Northfield) (Con): The Opposition make it sound as though the only people supplying these boxes last week were private companies,

but many of the pictures from Birmingham that were circulating were of packages provided by Birmingham City Council's catering company, Cityserve. Rather than trying to set one part of society against another when it comes to private companies, Members of Parliament should be working together to tackle these issues head-on.

Gavin Williamson: I think Members from all parts of this House will join together where there is unacceptable delivery, in terms of the standards we all expect. It is right to call that out, for action to be taken and for standards to be raised. People are admittedly working under extreme pressure, but we need standards to continue to increase. Equally, every one of us will have seen—not only in our constituencies, but right across the country—amazing work done by so many of our catering staff in schools. They have pulled out all the stops, and provided wonderful, nutritious meals for so many children up and down the country. It is important to put on record our thanks to those who have done so much.

Steve Brine: May I direct my right hon. Friend to the Connect4communities programme that Hampshire County Council is putting together? It includes a discretionary schools grant, a holiday play scheme, and free school meal vouchers for the February half-term. That is how we are spending £2.9 million or so of the covid winter grant to support families in my Winchester constituency. Does my right hon. Friend agree that when we discuss these matters, it is vital that we stick to the facts and the practical help on the ground for our constituents?

Gavin Williamson: Absolutely. My hon. Friend always makes excellent points, as my experience of working with him in the Whips Office always proved. He is right to highlight the brilliant work that Hampshire County Council is doing. So many local authorities are looking at this issue in an innovative and different way, and are able to have a bigger impact and offer more support to those families who are most disadvantaged, and to whom we want to see support and help offered.

We are well aware that free school meals play a vital role in making sure that disadvantaged children receive a healthy, nutritious meal each school day. They are aimed at families who are out of work or on low incomes, and I have no doubt that they represent a lifeline for many families who have been hard hit by this pandemic. Any school, family or pupil will be able to raise concerns about their food parcels through the Department for Education helpline. We have had a minimal number of cases so far, but we will take action on each and every one of them.

I want to be clear that children will be receiving food over the February half-term, just as they did at Christmas. In November, we announced a £170 million covid winter grant scheme to support vulnerable children and families—not only with food but, importantly, with other essentials, because we on the Government Benches recognise that this is not just an issue of food; sometimes, for those families most in need and requiring greater support, it is about other elements of support, too. Many of those families were struggling with bills, and other support could be provided through schemes such as the one so brilliantly outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine).

[Gavin Williamson]

We recognised that support needed to be put in place, and we are doing more to provide support for children over the holidays. As part of the winter package announced in November, we confirmed the expansion of our brilliant holiday activities and food programme, at a cost of £220 million. It would be remiss of me not to mention the work done by a former member of the Labour party, Lord Field, who has done so much to highlight this issue and has always been a great advocate for holiday activities. While we address the issue of food, we must not lose sight of the need to make sure that activities are going on, and the need to support young people, and most importantly, families. The expansion of the programme means that eligible children in every local authority throughout the country will be able to access healthy food and take part in fun activities over Easter, summer and Christmas, if they require that.

The course of the virus has changed since December. As a result of the change in trajectory, and bearing the possibility of future changes in mind, the Government will continue to keep under review what they need to do to ensure that all children continue to be fed, and families continue to be supported. I am confident that, thanks to the measures that we have put in place, remote education will go from strength to strength during this lockdown, enabling young people to make the educational progress that every single one of us in this House wants. Of course, every single one of us on the Government Benches wants to see them return to the classroom at the earliest opportunity.

I can confirm that the amendment tabled in the name of the Prime Minister will not be moved this evening. Government Members are focusing on making sure that we get social policy right for the children of this country, and that they and their families are properly supported. For those on the Opposition Benches, so often the tone of the debate is more about social media than social policy. What we see in this Government's actions are long-term solutions in respect of not just food, but activity for children at Easter, in the summer and into the future, because we realise and understand that that can make a real difference to children's lives.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. For the avoidance of any doubt, the Secretary of State did make it clear that he has not moved the selected amendment, so the Question before the House remains that already proposed—that is, as on the Order Paper.

I remind hon. Members that there will be a three-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches following the SNP spokesperson. When a speaking limit is in effect for Back Benchers, a countdown clock will be visible on the screens of hon. Members participating virtually and the screens in the Chamber. For hon. Members participating physically in the Chamber, the usual clock in the Chamber will operate.

8 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP) [V]: [Inaudible] this important motion, which the SNP absolutely supports—in fact, every Member with a conscience should be supporting this motion.

In my maiden speech, I talked about the difficulties of young people learning when they were hungry or living in a challenging environment. This pandemic has

made those issues even more acute. There are some basics that every child needs, such as food and warmth, but for successful learning to take place, they also need a safe place to study and access to appropriate resources. I am sure that Members will join me in welcoming the Scottish Government's ongoing commitment to free school meals, including in holiday periods. This is currently a cash-first response or vouchers for those eligible for free school meals, based on the individual family preference.

Our support for our most vulnerable children goes beyond free school meals. This year, we have introduced the game-changing Scottish child payment for eligible children under six to ensure that these youngsters have the very best start in life. Thousands of children and young people in receipt of free school meals are being supported through an additional £100 payment for every eligible child in the household. Despite the financial challenge, this shows a clear political commitment by the Scottish Government to the wellbeing of our youngsters.

We need a similar commitment from the UK Government to ensure that no child is going hungry, and that includes school holiday support. Having seen the shameful images of free school meals from last week, I ask the Government why private companies are profiteering off the back of hungry children. It should not be up to a private provider to decide what constitutes a weekly lunch offering. One thing that I know for sure is that families living in poverty know just how to make their budget stretch, so rather than arguing over who exactly is responsible, the Government should follow the example of the Scottish Government by just giving the families the money and trusting parents to feed their own children.

The Scottish Government have acted quickly to provide digital devices and support for remote learning. The Secretary of State said last week that Barnett consequential would be delivered to the Scottish Government for additional spending on laptops and tablets. It would be useful to know when we can expect this funding. There are some very good online resources. In Scotland, we have sites such as e-Sgoil and SCHOLAR, but despite the quality of these resources, they will always be second best to a normal classroom environment. They should not be considered a substitute for high-quality classroom teaching, where there is development—for example, of investigative and collaborative skills—and where teachers can identify issues and target support.

However, until we can reopen classrooms, access to these resources must be made available to all. Without this, all the digital devices that the Secretary of State describes are little more than glorified typewriters, so it would be good to hear a better explanation than he gave this afternoon as to why he refused BT's offer of internet access for disadvantaged learners. If he is struggling to identify these young people, he can contact the schools; they know exactly who is in need of such support. Ultimately, if the UK Government cannot deliver for Scotland at this time, they should devolve powers over broadband and borrowing to the Scottish Government, so that they can consign digital exclusion to the past.

There is not a person in this place who does not want children back in schools as soon as possible. This pandemic has highlighted the incredible job that our teachers do, so my final plea is that teachers be prioritised for vaccination, to ensure they have the confidence to return to full class teaching.

8.5 pm

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con) [V]: Although I voted against the Government previously on free school meals, I firmly believe that they have come up with a comprehensive package that should be recognised: £220 million for holiday activities and the food programme, £60 million for frontline food charities, £120 million last summer to keep free school meals going, Healthy Start vouchers, and £170 million for local authorities, 80% of which is ring-fenced for food and essential items. It is worth noting that all of this was welcomed by Opposition Members and the teaching unions at the time it was announced. It is also worth noting that, as the Prime Minister reminded the Liaison Committee last week, free school meals were proposed and invented by a Conservative Government, and that in 2012, alongside other MPs and the Association of Colleges, I successfully campaigned for their extension to disadvantaged college students.

I urge the Secretary of State to ensure that the £150 million from the sugar levy that is unaccounted for is used to expand the national school breakfast programme, as we know that breakfast clubs increase attainment by up to two months. This debate should not just have been a political sugar rush for the Opposition, in which to score political points against the Government when they have done the right thing; it should have been a debate on how to deal with the fundamental problems around food poverty through, for example, family hubs, early intervention, and reform of the welfare system.

I turn now to the issue of remote learning. A report by the Institute for Fiscal Studies has shown that poorer students spent less time learning than their richer peers, had fewer resources at home with which to learn effectively, and are less likely to return to in-person schooling when given the chance. I therefore welcome the Government's guidance on remote learning, the 1,900 laptops delivered to schools in Essex, and the direction of Ofsted to work with schools not as interrogators or investigators, but as candid friends.

However, we can provide all the laptops in the world, but the £1 billion catch-up scheme will still be fundamental. I therefore ask my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to confirm what he told the Select Committee on Education last week: that his Department will ensure all the national tutoring programme partners will be able to deliver online learning, and that the list of approved tuition partners will be flexible and rolling, allowing new and innovative tuition programmes such as the Invicta National Academy. Will he support teacher vaccinations to get our schools open, and will he carry out a risk assessment of the ongoing impact of school closures? Finally, does he not agree that the best solution to the issue of remote learning is to get our schools open as soon as possible, and get our children learning again?

8.8 pm

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): Throughout this pandemic, a light has been shone on the poverty and inequality in our country like never before. The free school meals fiasco is another example of the Government's complete lack of sincerity when it comes to tackling inequality in this country. A Government-contracted provider sent a food box that contained a pitiful spoonful of tuna in a tiny coin bag.

Someone is profiting from these boxes, and it is not children or families. Perhaps the Secretary of State can throw some light on to that.

I find this a shameful state of affairs for the fifth richest country in the world. I welcome the fact that the Government have agreed with the public that these boxes are unacceptable; however, their contents are very close to the Government guidelines issued for them. Until they were caught out, the Government were happy that children should be fed nutritionally inadequate lunches. When Opposition Members raise such issues with the Government, they rebut our points by telling us what they have done and how much funding has been committed—we have just heard an example of that. However, the problems still exist, so if Ministers are serious about this, I urge them to tell us what more they will do to ensure that no child in this country goes hungry.

When schools and colleges closed earlier this month, many pupils went home knowing that they would not be able to access classes the next day. While some children and young people are rightly able to attend school and engage with learning, the wide eligibility of critical workers has led to schools being oversubscribed. I have heard from schools in Brightside and Hillsborough that have had to prioritise children and turn others away. One school with 200 pupils has said that it can accommodate 80 of those safely, but 140 applied for a place. There is a similar story in many schools in my constituency.

With so many pupils unable to attend school, ensuring access to laptops and the internet is vital to mitigate the impact of the learning lost by so many children and young people already. A recent audit by Sheffield City Council found that, across the city, 7,000 children are without suitable devices and 4,500 have no connectivity. We are now into our third week of the national lockdown. Only this week has a free school meals voucher scheme been launched. More than 10,000 children and young people in Sheffield are still waiting to access home learning, along with many more in the country. It is a source of shame for our country to have let our children down so badly. The Government must accept that it is too little and it is too late.

The Government must no longer deny many thousands of children and young learners their right to good nutrition and the learning that they need and deserve. They are our country's future, and I beg the Government not to let them down again.

8.11 pm

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Con): In the interests of trying to get on to more people on the speakers list, I will try to be brief. However, I will do so without the toxicity, party rhetoric and empty claims from Opposition Members.

What we do need and what I do welcome is a much more holistic approach to a food strategy moving forward. So while I did vote against the Government previously on the topic of free school meals, I was pleased—as were Opposition Members, as were the teaching unions—when the covid winter support scheme came through and when the holiday activities support scheme came forward. This actually will make a serious and meaningful change to the lives of our young people.

[*Christian Wakeford*]

As we heard from the Secretary of State, over 700,000 devices have been delivered, and that should be applauded. Yes, we all want more to be delivered. However, we do need to wait for some of these laptops and devices to actually be manufactured. We have bought the capacity for the manufacturing to be proceeded with as quickly as possible. However, we cannot give devices that have not actually been built. Yes, I would like to go further and say that maybe we should devolve the budget to schools so that they can try to use their own procurement methods and perhaps find a more local solution, and I would urge my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to see if that is an option. However, we are limited to the manufacture, and I do applaud what we have done so far.

On school meals, we have heard from Opposition Members that now children all of a sudden will be going starving in the February half-term. However, their own union members welcomed the commitment back in November, saying the

“£170m channelled via local authorities to the end of March appears to address the immediate need to ensure that children do not go hungry over the Christmas and February half-term holidays.” So I ask: if it was welcome back in November, why is it not welcome now?

I would also like to echo my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) when he was calling for a wider view to be taken about the sugary drinks levy and the School Breakfast Bill in the name of the hon. Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck), which I am proud to be a sponsor of. I think that, if we are to take a wider view as to how we tackle not only hunger at school and children's hunger, but the attainment gap, this has to be something that we explore and explore meaningfully to try to tackle these problems.

Even on my own Labour council, the deputy leader of the council and cabinet member for education has said there is no issue with laptops locally. With that in mind, I would like to thank the Department for what it has done. Yes, we could do more, and yes, we could try to get things quicker, but this is similar to the vaccine: it is a matter of supply, not of being able actually to deliver.

8.14 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab) [V]: In the north-west, a quarter of a million children qualify for free school meals. Nearly 6,500 of those children live in my constituency. To put that in perspective, more children are claiming free school meals in Manchester, Gorton than in the constituencies of the Prime Minister, the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Education combined. It is no wonder then that the Government continually fail to comprehend the reality of life for children and families who rely on free school meals.

Schools, food banks, mutual aid groups and my constituents have helped throughout this difficult month. I am incredibly grateful to every single person involved. I must also thank Marcus Rashford for his tireless work through the crisis. I am sure that he knows this already, but Manchester is immensely proud of him.

For families struggling to make ends meet, free school meals are a lifeline. Yet, once again, we are having to persuade the Government to continue that support

through the school holidays. Without free school meals, half-term would be devastating for the 6,327 children in my constituency who, without this support, would go hungry.

The link between poverty and digital exclusion is clear: if people are poor, they have less chance of being online. For children this year, that has meant missing out on vital learning. I have spoken with headteachers across my constituency, who say that they are desperate for digital devices for pupils. Not a single one I spoke to said that enough devices had been received for all the children who need one. Sadly, children growing up in poverty are once again being abandoned by this Government. They are left to go without schooling and without food.

If the Government wanted to, they could change that overnight by extending the provision of free school meals over the upcoming half-term, introducing a cash-payment system for parents while schools are closed, and rapidly upscaling the delivery of digital devices to those schools that need them. I hope they will do so soon. Until then, I will continue to be a voice for the poorest and most in need in my constituency.

8.17 pm

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con) [V]: Nourishment is fundamental to learning, as to so much else. In recognition of its importance, of course, eligibility has been extended three times since 2010—among infants, in further education colleges as my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) mentioned, and with the extension of the universal credit roll-out.

In current circumstances, it has been right to extend support into the holidays, during the depths of this crisis. I support the covid winter grant scheme. In Hampshire, I welcome the programme elements that go considerably beyond lunches and children eligible for free school meals, as my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) mentioned, to target help where it is most needed, with things such as discretionary school grants, community pantries, provision of fuel cards where needed and other elements and channels.

Looking beyond covid, I hope that it will be possible to maintain and indeed extend the holiday food and activities programme, which a number of colleagues have mentioned and which we grew while I was at the Department for Education. The best programmes in that scheme include a variety of purposeful activity and family food-preparation workshops. I was very impressed when I visited to two such programmes run by Connect4Summer in my constituency of East Hampshire, in Headley Down and in Bordon.

Turning to the other part of the motion, on resources for learning remotely, this has clearly been an immensely difficult time for teachers, parents and children and I commend them all for what they have done. I support the unprecedented effort to provide extra hardware on top of the devices that schools already had, but of course, this is not only about that tech. That is far from the only aspect of remote education. Indeed, there are limits on it, especially further down the age range. Many schools have created fantastic paper resources, and old technology such as textbooks continues to play an important role. It is important to maximise the effectiveness of the less new technologies, which are widely available, and I am

pleased that the BBC has now announced more programming. I wish that that had happened earlier, because although there are many companies that can make great online resources, there are few that can do broadcasting.

The move to remote learning was so rapid that teachers and others did not have time to plan, but much has been learned since then by schools, ed tech suppliers and others. We have seen how to improve the balance, for example, between live lessons and at-your-own-pace work. We have learned more about what tech can and cannot do, and about how it can augment learning. The range of ed tech available now is truly outstanding, and the all-party parliamentary group on education technology is looking at the lessons that can be learned from lockdown. The road ahead is surely challenging for this generation of children and their amazing teachers in terms of getting back on track and re-narrowing the attainment gap, and it is essential that what we have learned in this time through the albeit enforced distance learning is put to best use when, in time, we return to normality.

8.20 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab) [V]: It is a great pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds). I want to share a few thoughts from the frontline here in Europe's youngest city, Birmingham. It is fair to say that many people will have a degree of sympathy, in that this was a crisis that could not have been foreseen, but nor could anybody else have foreseen it, and yet somehow here in this country we have had more lives lost than almost anywhere else, livelihoods have been hit harder than almost anywhere else, and now, as we are going to hear from this debate, more lessons are being lost here than anywhere else. The right hon. Gentleman was absolutely right to say that young people have a very hard road ahead of them. Here in Birmingham, like everywhere else in Britain, our children have really suffered from the exams fiasco last year. Here in the west midlands, youth services have been cut by two and a half times more than the national average, we have youth unemployment that is over 20%, and now our young people are being punished because they cannot get the education they need at home.

I was glad to hear that the Secretary of State is now interested in social policy. Let me share some data with him. We surveyed 443 schools last week in Birmingham, and I thank Ian Ward, the leader of the council, and cabinet member Jayne Francis for organising that. All but one of the respondents said that they had problems with technology for children at home. Some secondary schools are saying that they are 400 laptops short, 70% said that there were problems with connectivity and almost all of them said that there were problems getting through to the DFE. Listen to Maddie Bromley from Court Farm Primary School: "Deprived school. Allocation 51 laptops, only 10 arrived. Still waiting on the rest. Had to chase Government repeatedly." Or Helen Slack, the head of Twickenham Primary School: "No allocation for years 1, 2 and 3. Parents ringing in tears. Can't get an answer from the Department for Education." Another school said: "We are an infant school. We have been ignored by the DFE." And another: "As an infant school, we were not eligible for laptops." Another head said: "We have been in desperate need for laptops. Any help appreciated, thank you", and another

told me: "We have requested over 15 times now from the Department for Education and still haven't had a response." Some are reporting that there are anywhere between 70 and 250 parents in desperate need of technology support. This is a shambles. I say thank you to Birmingham City Council and thank you to Graeme Brown, the editor of the *Birmingham Post* and the *Birmingham Mail* for offering to jump into the breach and organise laptop collections, because where the Department has failed, we now need the good people and the good companies of Birmingham to come together to fill the breach.

8.24 pm

Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con) [V]: I would like to focus my remarks specifically on remote and online learning.

I would like to express my incredible admiration for all teachers who have managed to turn around at such fast pace and such short notice a fantastic programme of online support. I am the father of a six-year-old girl, a four-year-old son, and, in addition, a 14-month-old baby screaming in the background. I have just managed to wrestle this laptop away from their learning today. The level of support in what I have seen has been wonderful. Regardless of my ability to have access to a laptop, a number of people who are both working parents struggle to provide these three hours. I hold my hand up and say that I struggle to do the home schooling to the best of what I would like to be my ability. After this pandemic has ceased, we will need a national education recovery plan to look at all children's ability and see where they need to recover. That covers not just the disadvantaged but every single pupil who will have fallen behind on the track. I know that my children are not receiving the experience that they deserve from being present in school, but I would never think of suggesting that the money that is being invested in schools should be returned for not providing that level of support, because what they are providing digitally is the best they can do in difficult circumstances. I am sure that that view is shared by millions of parents across the country.

Why, then, should it be any different for other learning arenas—in particular, our universities? Thousands of lecturers have gone above and beyond to provide additional online resourcing materials, and yet these lecturers, who are sometimes paid less than primary school teachers, are supposedly providing an inferior service. The other day, one Labour MP talked about degrees being conducted by Zoom as if that was some kind of substandard process. It is not. Universities have invested more money than ever before in online procedures in just the same way that schools have. It costs more to provide online resources at university. To suggest that there should be a reduction in the fees level would simply lead to increased redundancies in universities. We need our universities, just as we need our schools, to be there to help students to recover when this pandemic ends. It is right, therefore, to support all educational settings and to fight for the fact that we need them for the future and must not put any of them under particular under attack.

8.27 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab) [V]: I have spoken before about growing up on free school meals and how important they are to

[Mrs Sharon Hodgson]

children and families, but also about the stigma that was palpable and what it actually felt like to grow up poor. Colleagues will know that I am incredibly passionate about this issue. I set up, and have chaired for over 10 years, the all-party parliamentary group on school food.

Progress has been made. However, the images of some of the food parcels given to families in the past few weeks have shocked us all and rightly shamed the companies that provided them. Families deserve dignity and should expect high-quality food to ensure that their children continue to eat healthy food throughout the school closures. But stale bread, browning bananas, peppers and tomatoes cut in half and processed cheese do not meet those expectations for the standards of meals in our schools. There is no silver bullet for replacing the lovely hot, healthy meals that children were due to receive in school, but the Government must accept that families have agency to go shopping and buy and prepare the food that works for them by themselves. Extensive research by the World Bank in all world economies, not just the poorest, proves that cash transfers work and that concerns around their use on “temptation goods” are “unfounded”. We should trust parents to do right by their children and give them the means to do so when schools are closed.

Food and access to it is going to be so important to our covid recovery. That is why, when children return to school, I want them to return to the hot and healthy meals they need and deserve. That means the Government supporting the schools’ food supply chain and making a commitment that we will not see any move away from hot and healthy free school meals when schools reopen. Free school meals have been hard fought for for over 115 years, and it is crucial that we protect them for children and families of the future who will need them too.

On Friday, I met headteachers in my constituency who told me of children working well into the night because their parents had to use the only laptop in the house for work during the day. In other homes, children are expected to share a device with five siblings. How can we hope for our young people to develop when we feed them poorly and force them to learn on one sixth of a shared computer with limited data access? The Government really must do better, and they have a chance tonight to accept that.

8.29 pm

Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con) [V]: This is an important subject, and I am pleased to be able to speak in this debate. We can be proud of the support that the Government have put in place for those who are most vulnerable to the dangers of the coronavirus, but there is no hiding from the fact that this has been, and continues to be, an incredibly difficult time for many in our communities. We have all had to adapt to the changes that the pandemic has forced upon us. Of all those conversations, one of the most important is about how we brace our young people, both in the here and now and against the difficulties they may face after we defeat the virus.

Colleagues are right to make reference to the package that the Government have put in place. I voted for the previous Opposition motion on free school meals, and I

would do it again, but the Government have now put in place increased support. The ambitious covid winter grant scheme introduced by the Government will fund holiday free school meals through local authorities for those children that need them, and the holiday activities and food programme will follow. Those are meaningful, real-life packages of support that local authorities and schools are using right now to help children. They are tailored to those who need them most. I was pleased to work alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) and local council leader Rob Waltham on this in our area.

Talking about this is important, and what hon. and right hon. Members say in this Chamber is important, but what matters most is what we do to improve the life chances of our young people. I am proud to work alongside those on the ground who get on with it and put that Government support in place. This issue should never be about headlines or the opportunity for political advantage. On that note, I want to thank and acknowledge those people at the frontline on free school meals and the provision of remote learning devices. Throughout this pandemic, our schools, our teachers and all our school staff have had to take on additional roles. They are now social workers, councillors and, with remote learning in place, IT consultants too. I hope that the Government will recognise those contributions in future pay reviews.

With our schools working hard to catch up, I call on the Government to continue their support for the catch-up premium and the national tutoring programme—important policies that can make a meaningful difference to children in areas such as Scunthorpe. Moving forward, our priority must be to ensure that the measures in place meet the needs of those supported, and I will carry on working with my local authority and the schools in my area to make sure that we do our best—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I thank the hon. Lady for her speech, but her time has come to an end.

8.33 pm

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab) [V]: The shocking pictures we have all seen of the tiny portions of grated cheese, half-sliced tomatoes and, if lucky, half a pepper are a measure of the contempt that this Government have for low-income families. During the pandemic, we have seen the Government squander billions of pounds awarding contracts for failed systems and substandard produce to friends of the Tory party, whether qualified or not. Every tight-fisted parcel put together with as little food as they could get away with, and every carrot baton and half-cut fruit, is a symbol of the Government’s having been dragged kicking and screaming to do the right thing on free school meals every step of the way. They would have got away with the penny-pinching food parcels for our country’s poorest children if one parent had not posted a picture online.

It is a similar story with the laptops. Barely any of the promised laptops materialised last year. The Government had months to plan for the likelihood of the winter lockdown. Their reluctance to do so has meant that today kids in my constituency cannot access their online lessons because they do not have hardware. Schools and children are relying on charity to bridge the shortfall. I am extremely proud of the way the people of Bedford

and Kempston have responded to the Government's failings during the pandemic. I want to thank Susan Lousada, the High Sheriff of Bedfordshire, who is leading a fantastic campaign to get laptops to pupils, with Bedfordshire Learning Link, Bedford Modern School, Bedford Borough Council, local businesses and rotary clubs, donations from the Harpur Trust, the Blues Foundation, and the generosity of other charities and individuals. It has been truly inspiring and a world of difference from the cynical, can't-do attitude I have seen from this Government.

The gap between the haves and the have-nots has never been wider. The digital divide has never been more obvious. It is not just low-income families who are really struggling; it is the just-about-managing, whom the Prime Minister's predecessors identified but did nothing to help. If the levelling-up agenda of this Government was anything more than an empty slogan, the Government would support the motion and invest in our children, starting with a comprehensive review of free school meals. Food poverty is an entrenched, long-term issue that requires a considered, long-term solution. Getting free school meals right is a good place to start.

8.36 pm

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con) [V]: I appreciate that we are living in unusual times, but we should not forget that not once did Labour provide free school lunches for children when schools were not open. Not once did they provide free lunches for three to four-year-olds. It took a Conservative Government to ensure that that happened.

The Opposition motion asks for children to receive the full value of free school meals, yet nobody is arguing against that. Of course, some of the food parcels we have seen are not sufficient. Some have been excellent, but for some reason we have seen less coverage of those. They need to provide a proper lunch for a child who needs it. That is not in dispute. Neither is the fact that we need to take action. There is no dispute that we need to help families at this time. The difference is how we support them.

What is really needed here is practical support for families who are having difficulties at this time. Handouts without support simply propagate dependency. We need to be empowering families to assist themselves, not chaining them to an overreliance on the state. We need to provide choice. That is why our package of support aims to do that for schools: the choice of a parcel of food or a voucher; the choice over which caterer to use; the choice of a local or national voucher. We have given £170 million to local authorities to provide targeted support to families who need it through the winter support fund. Even more is going to local authorities to support holiday programmes. This gives local authorities the ability to provide assistance not just to children eligible for free school lunches, but to families who have just missed out on eligibility for them or for struggling families who have children who have not started school yet. Nothing in the Opposition motion makes any mention of those people, yet they are very much a consideration for us. Over Christmas, we ensured that there was targeted support for children and families. That policy worked. The approach can be used again during the February half-term, with confidence that it will be a success.

The other part of the Opposition motion relates to laptops and other devices. Providing 1.3 million new laptops and tablets empowers families to help their children to learn when they otherwise would not. Thousands have been distributed in my constituency, with over 1,000 to one trust alone. No child should miss out on an education and this huge effort has helped to ensure that children do not miss out. There are hardly any other countries in the world that have provided more laptops to schoolchildren during this time than we have.

We can say that we have assisted children with both school lunches and technology. We have helped them probably more than any other country. There will always be more demanded of us. We will never reach the point at which somebody says, "That's enough, you can stop now." But what we have provided and will continue to provide is a package of measures that provides empowerment, choice and assistance for thousands of children, and that should be fully recognised.

8.39 pm

Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab) [V]: The challenges currently facing teachers, school support staff and childcare providers are daunting. Our teachers and education professionals in Enfield North have worked tirelessly, and for that I wish to thank each and every one of them. However, they have been trying to deliver world-class learning with one hand tied behind their backs. The lack of support from the Government has piled pressure on to families, who are struggling to juggle childcare, education provision and their jobs.

Labour's motion calls for action now to alleviate the pressure on families by guaranteeing that children receive the full value of free school meals support, including in school holidays, and for a date to be set by which every pupil will have the equipment needed to learn remotely. We are not asking for the earth. We simply call on the Government to act swiftly and with compassion. It has been nearly a year since the pandemic began, yet we still see a Government chasing their own tail; a Government whose indecisiveness and lack of compassion have undermined public confidence in their capacity to act in the public interest.

The pictures we have seen of supposed free school meals being opened by families have incensed a nation. They not only demonstrate how the Government's own rules are providing inadequate food to children but raise serious questions about how taxpayers' money is being misspent by the Chancellor. It should concern us all that contracts continued to be agreed that happily swap £15 of Government funding for £7-worth of food. In Enfield North, almost 5,000 pupils are eligible for free school meals. Each one of those children has talent, skills and knowledge waiting to be unleashed, but they are being held back by a flailing Government that have had nearly a year to correct their own errors.

Families are also living with the consequences of under-resourced schools. The Government pledged to provide 1.3 million laptops, yet 600,000—the equivalent of more than 600 secondary schools full of children—have not been delivered. Sadly, things are no different in my constituency, where hundreds of children are still without a laptop. Kingsmead School still requires 100 laptops. Enfield County School for Girls requires 212. Lee Valley

[Feryal Clark]

Academy still needs in excess of 120. I could go on. Each missing device represents a child being held back. Each empty plate represents a family deciding whether to put the heating on or to buy food. What remains constant under this Government is that families are being left behind due to incompetence and dithering.

8.42 pm

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): This is an incredibly important debate. We need to ensure that remote learning is high-class for all pupils, regardless of the school they go to. I had the opportunity to raise in a question earlier the issue of live lessons and why they are so important for pupils with special educational needs, who may not have an education, health and care plan, which entitles pupils to still go to school. I spoke to a headteacher of a school that caters purely for dyslexic students this morning, and she explained to me how her school has all live lessons and how she thinks that is so important for pupils with dyslexia. I would like the Government to take that on board.

On free school meals—an issue with a lot of heat around it—I am proud of the support the Government have provided throughout the pandemic. I do not think there is an example of any Government in modern British political history that have been so ambitious in the support they have provided. I am talking about the £170 million winter grant scheme. I am talking about the more than £200 million committed to holiday activities and the food programme. Suffolk got £2 million from that £170 million fund, and less than half of that will have been spent on guaranteeing that all eligible pupils got free school meals over Christmas and will get them over February. That leaves more than £1 million for other kinds of interventions to help all sorts of families—not only those with children eligible for free school meals but those who do not but are struggling as well. That is very much to be welcomed.

It has often been suggested by the Labour party that that incredibly expensive and ambitious package of support was somehow cobbled together at the last minute. It absolutely was not. So much of what the Government have committed came directly from the national food strategy, which was commissioned in June 2019. Just this summer, I had the pleasure of the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), visiting my constituency, where we were a pilot for the holiday activities and food programme. She spoke passionately about how it was her ambition for that to be extended across the country. This has been a Government priority for a long time, and I have absolutely no concerns about whether this Government have at their heart the desire to support and cater for children who are struggling the most at this time.

In terms of the quality of free school meals, I support the comments made by a number of Members that the images we saw were unacceptable, but the reality is that these food parcels come about as a result of lots of individual decisions made by different local councils. Some decide to have vouchers. Some decide to have food parcels. Some food parcels are high-quality and others, as we have seen, are completely not. That is a result of many decisions—some made by Labour councils,

might I add? I think that virtually all of us do care about this issue, but I do not think that supporting this particular motion is the best way of progressing. I am focused on results and action, not virtue signalling.

8.46 pm

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: May I just say that I do not want to turn this into a typical debate where we blame the Government for everything? We have a covid crisis that has shaken everyone's lives. We have much higher unemployment than usual and many families are struggling, but the fact is that we know that the Government have shown less than the surest touch in many of the educational challenges that we have had over this last year.

However, to put that to one side, may I make a plea tonight to trust parents? I listen to a lot of parents. I happen to have three daughters, a son and 12 grandchildren, so it is easy to do that, but I also do it rigorously in my constituency all the time. The fact is that parents would prefer to have cash rather than any other kind of package of food. We all know that that leads to a divided society, with some kids thinking that they are lesser than their equals.

We should trust parents on home schooling. Home schooling can be very good and it can be very patchy indeed. My experience and knowledge is that using technology is difficult if someone is a teacher. I am a pioneer tutor in the Open University. We thought we could do it all with computers, television screens and all that, but we could not. Teachers have to be trained to use the technology. University teachers have to be trained for something they never anticipated—teaching online. It is a highly difficult skill to learn.

I am sorry that the Government took so long to get in touch with the Open University and enable it to use all its resources, knowledge and experience to help teachers and lecturers up and down the country. That being said, let us also trust teachers themselves. I have seen the best example of teachers who phone every five-year-old in the class every week. That is wonderful—their experience, showing every way of reaching out to children. I believe that that is what we must encourage—every school learning to learn again—because we will have this situation for much longer. So well done, parents; you have gone through a hell of a lot. Well done, teachers. And well done, colleges of further education, which are so often neglected. It is not just about computers—it is about people.

8.48 pm

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con) [V]: I put on record my thanks to all the staff at the schools in Wantage and Didcot who have worked tirelessly through the pandemic to make sure that children and young people get at least some education. I do not think that there is a Member of this House who does not want to see all children get high-quality, nutritious food, and have laptops and high-quality internet access. It is right that the Government have spent hundreds of millions of pounds on providing this.

However, when it comes to remote education, I am afraid that nothing we do could ever be a substitute for being in the classroom. If the Government were to provide a laptop to every home, along with the best internet connection in the land, I do not think that would solve

the disadvantage gap or deal with the huge mental health crisis that is coming for children and young people. I am not even sure that it would lead to every child getting a full timetable of remote learning.

We saw a huge gulf in the remote learning that pupils received last year. There were many reasons for that, but one reason that the Labour party does not like to mention is that when we went into the first lockdown, the largest education union, the National Education Union, put out a statement saying that teachers should not be teaching a full timetable or routinely marking work. It said that we cannot educate children and young people remotely. Whereas the Labour party would suggest that the only barrier to remote education is the Government not providing laptops fast enough, I would say that the leadership of that union took a clear stance—personally, I do not think that it reflected the views of teachers—that inhibited the remote learning that pupils received last year.

Similarly, the shadow Secretary of State for Education says that she wants to see schools open—I am completely with her on that, because I think that is how we will tackle these issues—but when we wanted to reopen schools, I did not hear her criticise the 180-point checklist produced by the same union, on safety grounds, as though teaching children was like working with radioactive material. Similarly, I did not hear her criticise the constant drumbeat of stories suggesting that schools were unsafe and needed to be closed again.

We need to work to get all children back to school as soon as possible. Labour's motion could have been about that, but it is not. I hope that when we come to reopen schools, Labour will call out anybody who stands in the way, because as much as children and young people need laptops, most of all they need to be in the classroom.

8.51 pm

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab) [V]: The concept of remote learning leans heavily into the topic of digital exclusion—the exclusion of those who do not have the devices or data needed to access education. The Government may talk about addressing the issue, but yet again they are simply not doing enough, and what they are doing is at the latest possible moment.

The digital divide and the impact it is having on people's lives was known about before the pandemic. It meant that people struggled to access services and information, and to engage with the digital world around them. When the pandemic arrived, it forced everyone indoors and into a digital world. It shone a light on the digital inequalities that already existed and, as time went on, exacerbated them. It was no longer a choice to work or access services from home, or for young people to access their education from home; it became a necessity. This situation accelerated the existing inequalities tenfold.

Remote learning became the only way for the vast majority of our children and young people to access their education. A clear divide opened up between those who had internet connection, data and devices, and those who did not. If the Government had invested in the procurement and distribution of devices on the first day of the pandemic, they would have been a Government acting too late, but 10 months later they have still not taken adequate action. We must remember that every

day lost in education is a day of potential lost. There are still thousands of children up and down the country who are unable to access their education.

The Department for Education might say that it is going to provide 1 million devices, but that is not good enough. The actual digital divide, according to Ofcom, means 1.8 million people not having adequate connectivity. I am proud that organisations such as Laptops for Kids North East and the Good Things Foundation are reaching out to those in need in our communities and supporting people, giving them the data and devices they need, but they are having to do that because the Government have failed to do so.

This debate is rightly combined with the issue of free school meals. I applaud my neighbouring MP, my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), for campaigning on this issue for years; I agree with everything she said. It was heart-wrenching to see the images posted online last week of food parcels. Our children deserve so, so much more. The Government may try to pass the blame on to others, but it was their policy that got us into this mess. It is the Government's responsibility to put this right and put it right fast by guaranteeing a substantial, healthy free school meal to all children who need one.

8.54 pm

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con) [V]: I am pleased to be able to make a contribution to this debate on current educational issues. I should like to begin by praising teachers in my constituency and across the whole of the borough of Bexley, who have continued to work hard and professionally during this pandemic. Teaching today is more challenging than ever before, and certainly more so than when I was a teacher and lecturer in the past. We also need to praise the support staff in our schools.

The past year has been very difficult for everyone, and the Government have had to adapt their approach to the changing situation. The Government have been correct in their approach of making the education and welfare of our young people a top priority. Children need to learn and to socialise and to be in school when it is safe to be so. Parents, too, must be praised for rising to the challenges of combining work, home life and helping their children with virtual and remote school learning. There are real concerns about school closures, including mental health issues and the inadequate free school meal boxes. However, I want to concentrate on the issue of learning and studying at home during the pandemic.

Despite the totally unprecedented situation we have all faced since the start of the pandemic, the Government have worked tirelessly to ensure that every child has access to the world-class education they deserve, including by strengthening the minimum standards for remote learning and introducing binding requirements for schools to deliver high-quality remote education. Schools are now expected to provide between three and five hours of teaching a day, depending on a child's age. Remote education provision is much better than it was a year ago, and we praise the Government for the money, the laptops and all the things they have done to make sure that schools can carry on with remote learning for our children.

[Sir David Evennett]

A lack of internet connectivity is another significant barrier. As part of the continued efforts to support disadvantaged children through the Get help with technology programme, the Government have partnered with the UK's leading mobile phone operators to provide free data to those students without internet access, as well as delivering 54,000 4G routers to schools and colleges.

While the Government have strived to keep schools open, it is regrettable but necessary that they recently had to close them because of the pandemic. I have some concerns, as we all do, about remote learning, including the lack of physical and social interaction, the possibilities of experiencing technical difficulties and the effects of increased screen time. Education is very important for improving social mobility. It helps shape our young people's futures and gives them opportunity. A good education provides the knowledge and skills required to succeed. I am a big supporter of social mobility for disadvantaged young people; it is absolutely essential.

8.57 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab) [V]: This debate on free school meals cannot be separated from the earlier one on universal credit, because both prompt the question: why are over 14 million people living in poverty in the sixth richest country on earth? This endemic poverty is the result of a broken model and an ideological choice—one that the Conservative party chooses to make. Poverty has soared in this crisis, and the Government choose not to do all they can to tackle it, just as they made the choice to impoverish families with a decade of austerity.

The school food parcels fiasco highlights so much that is wrong with the system. It shows that when services are privatised and outsourced, profit is put first. How else can we explain Government guidelines that mean a £15 food parcel leaves kids with just £5-worth of food, with the vast majority going to the private companies? This is food literally taken from a child's mouth, while the CEO of the company responsible for those shocking food parcels is paid £4.7 million per year—280 times more than its dinner ladies. It does not have to be this way. Leeds City Council gives proper food parcels to children by keeping the services in-house—public services run for the public good.

The food parcel scandal also shows that the Conservative party's contempt for people in poverty knows no bounds. My party wants to see cash instead of food parcels going to families. The Conservatives disagree. They do not trust people in poverty to do what is best for their children. As a Conservative MP once disgracefully put it, the money could go direct to "a crack den" or "a brothel".

But people are not in poverty because of a character failing, or because they do not work hard. People are in poverty because the broken economic model cannot provide them with a job that pays enough to live on, and because the Government refuse them the services they deserve. They include the tens of thousands of children in my region waiting for laptops so that they can work online. These kids deserve a proper chance in life. Their futures are not worth less than those of the children at the elite private schools that many members of the Cabinet attended, but the Government act like they are.

Finally, my party stood at the last election on a manifesto pledging both free broadband for the whole country and free school meals for all primary school children. Such policies are needed now more than ever. If this crisis has shown us anything, it is that the social safety net is broken. It is time to move back to a universal model.

9.1 pm

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con) [V]: School is and always will be the safest and best place for a pupil to learn. Delivering remote education is a real challenge, as not every pupil has an environment at home that is easy to work in or has the necessary technology and connectivity. It is equally challenging for teachers to try to replicate as much as possible the learning environment of a normal classroom setting. Some £400 million has been spent on supporting schools and colleges in moving to remote provision, so that every child can access the education they deserve, with 700,000 laptops and tablets and 54,000 4G routers delivered. That is alongside the £5 million spent on our unsung heroes of the pandemic, the Oak National Academy.

With regard to free school meals, it is disappointing and disheartening to see the Labour party wanting to politicise such an important topic. I spent eight and a half years working as a teacher and a head of year in state secondary schools across London and Birmingham. Every day, I worked tirelessly to ensure that the next generation had the education they deserved, as well as looking after their welfare and wellbeing, in the privileged position of loco parentis. I understand how important free school meals are to young people and their families, yet the Labour party spreads misleading graphics, creating anger due to falsehoods, which leads to people calling colleagues and me "Tory scum", to echo the comment directed by the deputy leader of the Labour party towards my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Chris Clarkson).

Those in the Labour party seem to believe that they own the monopoly on compassion; they believe that my being a Conservative somehow means that I do not care about the most vulnerable in my community. This is student union politics, intent on pitting people against one another, whereas we should recognise that child holiday hunger is an issue that should unite rather than divide us.

To help to tackle holiday hunger over the winter, including the February half-term, the Government announced a £170 million winter support package for not just those eligible for free school meals, but those of pre-school age and vulnerable and elderly adults in our local communities. That is in addition to the £63 million given to local authorities last June for food and other essential support. Stoke-on-Trent City Council has used the collected £1.5 million of funding wisely. Some 80,640 free school meals will be provided for students, with £110,000 for Stoke-on-Trent Foodbank, £30,000 for the amazing Hubb Foundation, which will partly fund slow cookers, ingredients and recipe cards for families for 12 weeks, and £60,000 for local charity Beat the Cold to provide 100,000 fuel vouchers to vulnerable households affected by fuel poverty.

I fully support the £220 million for the holiday activities and food programme, which means that this calendar year, a place can be offered to every child who is eligible for free school meals, enabling them to benefit from a

healthy, nutritious meal, alongside physical and mental stimulation, which is equally important to a young person's health.

9.3 pm

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab) [V]: The digital lottery is hindering the life chances of children and the next generation. If the Government mean what they say about levelling up education, the standard of education and the life chances of working-class children must be front and centre of that agenda.

In early 2020, Ofcom's technology tracker estimated that between 1.4 million and 1.78 million children under the age of 18 in the UK lived in households without access to a laptop, desktop computer or tablet. We can add to that up to half a million people living in households with no access to the internet. A further 900,000 live in households where the only access to the internet is via a mobile phone. Those are very stark figures indeed.

Unlike in the previous lockdown, it is now a legal requirement for schools to provide a remote education. Perhaps that is driving the Government's decision to relax the criteria on children being in schools, which is resulting in dangerously high attendance rates. The Government know they have yet again failed to plan, and are once again playing catch-up. A prime example of that can be seen in Northway Primary School in my constituency; it ordered 37 iPads from the Department for Education in October, but they were only delivered on 13 January. That is just one of many constituency examples that demonstrate that the Government were not even meeting demand prior to the school closure; they were failing to keep pace with smaller orders from schools supporting children isolating at home. This is simply not good enough, and clearly contributes to the fact that the gap in England between some pupils and their wealthier peers widened by 46% during the school year.

Labour's 2019 manifesto pledge of free broadband was roundly mocked by professional commentators and Government politicians in the last election. The greatest tragedy of all is that the very thing that policy sought to address, digital exclusion, is wreaking havoc with the learning of the next generation. It is time for the Government to actually deliver on their "whatever it takes" promise, to ensure that the gaping inequalities in our education system are closed once and for all, and to prevent a whole generation of children from being robbed of a decent education, and the life chances that go hand in hand with that. Every child matters and deserves to succeed. Nothing less is good enough. Nothing less is acceptable.

9.6 pm

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con) [V]: Tonight, I will focus on remote learning. That will give me the opportunity to pass on some of what I have heard from teachers about their experiences during the pandemic. My understanding is that, to put it simply, remote learning puts at a massive disadvantage the most vulnerable pupils, who may not have the same resources as others. They may not have somewhere quiet or even safe in which to work, and may be less inclined to continue their learning when not in school. We saw that those who did not attend live lessons during the first lockdown had an evident knowledge gap when they came back to school

in September. According to teachers I have spoken to, we are seeing that play out once again, as those same pupils are not participating now. So that gap is becoming ever wider.

Significant investment has certainly been made in remote learning; millions have been invested in supporting remote education and access to online social care. As we have heard, more than 700,000 laptops and tablets have been delivered to disadvantaged children at schools and colleges, with hundreds of thousands more on the way. Ministers are working with major telecommunication companies to improve internet connectivity for disadvantaged and vulnerable families who rely on mobile internet connection, but we must go beyond those initial interventions, as some pupils are still missing from lessons.

Two key issues remain. The first is that children need interaction with their peers; mental health issues, with potential social care effects, arise from not having that. Of course, the best way to address that is to reopen schools safely, as soon as possible, which brings me on to the second issue. Although most teachers want to get back in front of children as soon as possible, many do not feel safe doing so. Many express anxieties about household mixing, and the hundreds of close interactions per day. To make them feel safer, school staff must be made a higher priority for vaccination, particularly those with underlying health conditions who are under the age of 50. They should get the vaccine soon, at least before the suggested reopening after half-term. Widespread vaccinations will engender a feeling of safety among school staff, and I believe this is the quickest way for schools to return to normal.

Teachers have made massive sacrifices. They have been unable to see their families for months. The only safe and fair way to reopen schools is following a vaccination programme among school staff, and I ask the Government to prioritise that. The future of schoolchildren, especially the most disadvantaged, depends on it. Our teachers have been nothing short of heroic, and they need our support. They are on the frontline, so now is the time to put them at the front of the line.

9.9 pm

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD) [V]: I shall focus my remarks on free school meals, because the public simply do not understand why struggling families are having to fight the Government again and again on this issue. Last week alone, there were two such fights: first, on the appalling-quality food packages that were sent out for children in place of free school meals, and secondly, on the Government's instruction to schools not to provide free school meals during the February half-term, which left families confused and anxious about whether and how they would be able to access this lifeline.

In my constituency of St Albans, children in at least one primary school got boxes of food from HCL—Hertfordshire Catering Ltd—a preferred provider of Hertfordshire County Council. In that box, for a week, were just 10 items, including bread, baked beans, carrots, tomatoes and baking potatoes. There was a tin of tuna and two slices of processed cheese, but they were no good for the child who is dairy and fish intolerant. According to the guidance, there should also have been sweetcorn, yoghurts, apples, oranges, biscuits and a muffin, but they were not there. The public are sick of this Schrödinger's school meals policy.

[Daisy Cooper]

A few months ago, some Conservative MPs argued against extending free school meal provision to the holidays on the basis that it was the responsibility of struggling parents to feed their children, but in Hertfordshire, the Conservative-run county council is, so far, refusing to give parents responsibility for buying their own food, leaving them at the mercy of contractors who are dishing out half-empty boxes.

Let us not forget how many children living in poverty still do not get a free school meal at all, including children who would be eligible but have no recourse to public funds, and those kids whose parents are in receipt of universal credit. If the Government were serious about improving child nutrition and helping the families who are struggling the most, they would look at this issue again.

Liberal Democrats are proud of our track record on free school meals. In England, free school meals were a Liberal Democrat policy introduced by the coalition Government. Last autumn, Wales, which has a Liberal Democrat Education Minister, was the first UK nation to ensure that pupils received free school meals over the summer holidays, and it quickly delivered IT kit for the most disadvantaged pupils. Liberal Democrats are now calling on the Government for a “No ifs, no buts” long-term commitment on free school meals. Whether a child is in school or at home, during term time or holidays, every child in poverty who needs a decent meal a day should get one.

9.12 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con) [V]: I join colleagues in paying tribute to the teachers involved in delivering remote learning. Let me also say how proud I am of those teachers who are still going to school to teach the children of key workers; they greatly deserve our praise, because it is important to provide the best education that we can for those children. We have heard from the Secretary of State how he is doing that, and I am impressed with what we have done: we have spent £400 million and ordered 1.3 million laptops and other devices for children.

There are, though, some problems with delivery. I am pleased that the BBC has come into this debate, although one thing that that disguises is the difficulty of getting good broadband. Even in my constituency, one need not go more than a couple of miles outside the town of Henley to find poor broadband.

I am proud of what parents are doing, but I wish they were all like one of my constituents, who makes sure that her daughter dresses in school uniform to do her remote learning. My constituent, who is a teacher herself, says that is important; it brings about a noticeable improvement in the child's concentration while learning remotely.

I heard the Secretary of State set out time limits for individuals to follow in the delivery of remote learning, but we will need to keep an eye on that because, while some schools are sticking to those limits, others are going well beyond them and are providing whole days of teaching rather than the bits of days of teaching that we have heard about.

Finally, let me ask just one question, which I do not think that anyone has mentioned so far. Can the Minister tell me what is being done to help blind students to

participate in remote learning? They have needs of their own and it is very difficult to see how, on the face of it, they are being allowed to participate in this learning.

9.15 pm

Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con) [V]: One of the greatest tragedies of this pandemic is its impact on our children. Millions of young people have lost months of face-to-face schooling, missing out on their education and denied the social interaction that is so crucial to their development and wellbeing. Virtual schooling can never replace face-to-face learning, but while school buildings remain closed to most children, access to online education is vital. For some children, one of the barriers to online learning is a lack of equipment, which is why the Government are providing 1.3 million devices to schools across the country. This drive to purchase such an enormous quantity of laptops and tablets has involved co-ordinating multiple manufacturers, dedicated factory runs, and prioritising shipping. Against a backdrop of soaring global demand, the Department for Education has become one of the largest buyers of IT in the world. We must continue to deliver these devices at pace.

I commend Ministers and officials for their extraordinary efforts, but online learning also depends on schools' ability to deliver virtual lessons. A year ago, teaching the entire curriculum remotely would have been unthinkable, but now teachers up and down the country are logging on to Zoom or Google Classroom, greeting their classes face to face and using innovative resources to teach lessons.

Having been in contact with local headteachers throughout the pandemic, I know that schools in Penistone, Stocksbridge, Ecclesfield, Chapeltown and Dodworth have made sustained efforts to create and refine their remote learning provision. Last week, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor helped to deliver a virtual maths lesson to year 6 at Oughtibridge Primary School in my constituency. He saw for himself just what is possible with interactive remote learning. I am pleased to report that the Chancellor's maths is of a very high standard.

Our schools have transformed the way that they work while working to strict new public health guidance, operating test and trace and delivering catch-up schemes. On behalf of children and parents across my constituency, I want to say a huge thank you.

On free school meals, we need to differentiate between lunches provided by schools during term-time and wider welfare support offered to struggling families. The continuation of free school meals has never been in doubt. During lockdowns, the Government have offered the choice of food parcels or supermarket vouchers to support children and learning from home. In terms of wider help, the pandemic has caused real hardship to many families. I welcome the covid winter support grant, providing £170 million to local councils to tackle food poverty this winter, including during school holidays. I support the measures that the Government have taken to help families over the past year, but what our children need now is a rapid return to the classroom, and I wholeheartedly support the Secretary of State in his determination to make that happen.

9.18 pm

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab) [V]: I am dismayed, but not surprised that, yet again, we are having to put pressure on this Government to do the

right thing by hungry children in the middle of a pandemic. In the first five weeks of the initial lockdown, more than 2 million children experienced food insecurity. More than 4 million children are living in poverty. They are hungry every single day, every day of the year with no let-up in sight. Any decent Government would be proactively doing everything in their power to make sure that every single one of those children had access to nutritional healthy food.

The Secretary of State, at the outset of this debate, predictably reeled off schemes and grants that the Government have put in place. They were schemes and grants that they had to be shamed into providing, just as we saw last week, when yet another one of their associates was given public money to deliver meagre food parcels that, disgracefully, met the Government's own guidelines. The Secretary of State is also missing the point. If the winter covid grant, the holiday activities and food programmes, the national school breakfast programme, and school meals vouchers and parcels were leaving no child without why are food banks inundated with desperate parents seeking help for their children? Why is it that UNICEF, for the first time in its 70-year history, is feeding hungry children? Of course, in the absence of any other support, I would not wish for these piecemeal and short-term schemes and grants to disappear. I will continue working with the Magic Breakfast scheme to press for the implementation of my School Breakfast Bill, because when the scheme ends in July, many children will be left with that gnawing hunger in their stomach at the start of their school day, and we all know that no matter how talented or amazing a teacher is, that hunger will impact on learning.

Just last week, Sustain found that £700 million from the soft drinks levy that was intended for school breakfast provision is unaccounted for. I hope that the Minister can confirm where that money has gone when she sums up. As the Food Foundation has recently called for, we need to rethink school meal provision, but we also need to stop looking at school meals in isolation. The reason that so many children are in poverty and going hungry is that we have had over a decade of cruel policy making that has plunged families into destitution and despair. That there are hungry children in a country as rich as ours is no accident, and it is not purely a result of this pandemic.

To those Government Members who have spent all day claiming that tonight's debates and votes do not matter, I simply say this: they matter to millions of children and families; and they matter to the 3,000-plus children in South Shields who receive free school meals. How Members vote tonight lets them and all our constituents know what we stand for, who we are, and, more importantly, who it is that we really care about.

9.21 pm

Gary Sambrook (Birmingham, Northfield) (Con): Last week, I emailed all the headteachers in my Birmingham, Northfield constituency to see what the situation was like on the ground in respect of free school meals and laptops. I just want to go through some of their responses. Many reported to me that parents preferred the voucher system that is coming back this week, as opposed to the packages, because the vouchers allow greater flexibility and choice. There can be a stark difference between schools. Some schools said they were preparing over

100 packages, but only 20 were being picked up; I think the voucher system was having a near 100% take-up rate, so it is really important that it is restarting this week.

The vast majority of the schools said that they were using the city council's Cityserve scheme, and there were a range of views about the adequacy of those food packages, from "okay" to "severely inadequate". Unfortunately, many teachers have really had to push back on the city council to ensure that they are getting value for money, with some estimating that the £15 packages were really only worth about £4. Birmingham City Council has often been very critical of the Government's approach, and it is about time that its words and actions met in the middle, but it did also step up to the mark.

On laptop provision, there was quite a bit of disparity between schools. Some had received 100% of their allocation. Others had only a few, but were expecting big deliveries this week. I will be following up with them later this week to ensure that they get what they have been allocated. One headteacher suggested that schools should be given a budget so that they could buy some laptops themselves. That would add some capability to the procurement system, as they could probably find some local providers. Some of my infant schools suggested that some laptops be allowed for use in infant schools, because of the three hours of remote learning each day.

I thank the many teachers who have been working extremely hard to ensure that children are being educated at the moment, balancing the very difficult task of teaching in a classroom and digitally. They have been working incredibly hard, and everybody in the House recognises that work. I also thank the many parents who are juggling working from home with helping to home school their children. I was talking to my best friend Michaela last night, and we were giggling at some of the things she was having to teach her young boys because it took us back to our schooldays. It is very difficult—I probably would not remember some of it myself now—but it is important that those parents are going above and beyond every day. We must all be thankful to them.

On the whole, the Government have got this absolutely right. It is incredibly important that we tackle these issues head-on, and provide these vital food vouchers and laptops for children.

9.24 pm

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab) [V]: First, I pay tribute to teachers, as well as those at my local authority, Calderdale Council, working alongside them to support children, their wellbeing and their education at home and in the classroom. Schools throughout this difficult period have been beacons of resilience and innovation, and I am in awe of the personal contribution that teachers have made to this national effort.

Teachers do a really good impression of superheroes, but they are human beings, and they cannot perform magic tricks, nor can they create more hours in the day. Asked to respond to testing announcements on the last day of term, heads were notified at 8 pm that schools would close to some children from the very next day. They will make happen what needs to happen, but I urge the Government simply to respect what is humanly possible when introducing changes and the timeframes in which they expect those changes to be delivered.

[Holly Lynch]

I have been delighted to see brilliant local teachers from Halifax, including Matt Perry, Gugsy Ahmed and Mungo Sheppard, on local and national news outlining the challenges they have been faced with and their constructive asks on behalf of the kids to whom they dedicate their lives. Their biggest challenge has been securing equipment for children who do not have it, as so many other Members have already said, to allow learning to continue remotely. Just one secondary school in Halifax, in a ward where a third of children aged nought to 15 live in income-deprived households, has been unable to secure the 171 further laptops it needs to equip just those children on the pupil premium with a laptop or tablet from the Department for Education, and the picture is not dissimilar right across the borough.

I take this opportunity to thank the Community Foundation for Calderdale and Calderdale Council, which together have launched the “Laptops for Learning” campaign today, which follows the success of their much-needed “Never Hungry Again” campaign. They are stepping in to fundraise for laptops, in addition to ensuring that children are not going hungry throughout this period. What do towns do when they have not got a community foundation? Ours has supported Calderdale through so much, alongside a council that goes over and above to do whatever it needs to for our families and their children. This Government need to understand that they are failing children on both those fronts.

The final point that I will have time to make this evening is that a school today told me that because of the private finance initiative arrangements for its school building, which only opened in 2016, Interserve, which has the ongoing catering contract as part of that arrangement, has notified the school to expect a loss of earnings bill for between £30,000 and £50,000 due to the lack of children coming through its canteen to buy lunch. That is outrageous, and I anticipate this problem is about to creep up on schools across the country. In closing, I very much hope the Minister will join me in calling on those companies to rule out such grossly unfair bills for our schools.

9.27 pm

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con) [V]: May I put on record my thanks to the hard-working teachers, headteachers and school staff of Darlington for their tireless efforts in keeping going during what has been the most difficult year they will ever have faced? We were all shocked by the images of the substandard food packages that circulated last week, which were not acceptable on any level.

I also record my thanks to Conservative-controlled Darlington Borough Council, which has done so much with the funds from Government to support people, such as investing in additional vehicles to work with the Bread and Butter Thing, a food redistribution scheme that I have been privileged to support. It has diverted 180 tonnes of food from landfill, delivered 250,000 meals and been supported by more than 2,500 hours of volunteering.

From the £170 million covid winter grant that Darlington received, £364,000 has enabled the council to ensure that every child eligible for free school meals was fed

over Christmas and will continue to be fed over the half-term holidays. The Government’s innovative holiday activities and food programme, which is being rolled out across the country this Easter, will continue to ensure that no child goes hungry, and that children can also engage in enriching activities. The Opposition wish to drive a divisive agenda, feeding a narrative that it is only they who care—a narrative that fuels the hateful campaigns seen by many of us on the Government Benches. Kinder, gentler politics it is not.

We all know that children learn best when they are at school, but for many it is not possible, and it is wonderful to see the schemes that have been brought forward by the Government to step up the delivery of devices. In Darlington, more than 70% of the devices requested by schools have already arrived and are being used. Darlington’s secondary schools have received all of what they asked for, and it is right that examination-level students have taken priority. The picture among primary schools is still emerging. I have written to the Minister about that, and I thank her for her engagement with me. I know that devices are continuing to arrive as quickly as they can be delivered.

This Government’s commitment to delivering one of the world’s largest programmes of technology is remarkable, and they deserve credit for making such a huge commitment to our children, the benefit of which will continue into the future. When the chips were down, this Government have stepped in, putting food on the plates of our children so they do not go hungry and equipment in their hands to ensure they can continue to learn. That was the right thing to do. Tonight we have seen Labour play its games and drive division, and already it is pushing its hateful posts in every seat it lost in the north. It is clear that it will never learn.

9.30 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab) [V]: The provision of home schooling—[*Inaudible.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. There is something deeply wrong with the sound system. We will try to come back to Yasmin Qureshi, but meanwhile we will go to Brendan Clarke-Smith.

9.31 pm

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con) [V]: One thing we have learned with this virus is that sometimes drastic steps have to be taken at very short notice. I know from personal experience that nothing can be a substitute for in-person teaching, but I also know that we have a profession committed to doing its best to make sure it can offer as near an experience to that as possible. Schools of course have never been closed. Our schools have stayed open throughout to support the children of critical workers and our most vulnerable pupils. Our teachers are doing an incredible job, sometimes having to balance both virtual and physical teaching simultaneously. I also want to say thank you to all the other staff working at schools, who are sometimes forgotten.

That is why I am delighted that this Government have helped to provide extra support for remote learning—be it laptops or routers going out to those in need, the work we have done with mobile phone companies on

data allowances or the excellent resources for Oak National Academy. We have provided a £400 million package to support children and their families, including the £170 million covid winter grant scheme to help with food and bills. To spread this money too thinly would be a mistake, and it is absolutely right that we use that to target those most in need.

We have also increased spending on school meals to £15 per child. It is a shame, then, that some have misrepresented free school lunches as meals for the entire day or, indeed, for the entire family; they are not. However, the support is there for those who genuinely need help. We have been clear in our guidance throughout about what we expect to be in food parcels. When school contractors do not provide that, it is right that they are pulled up and challenged.

Opposition days should be a chance to have a healthy debate, not an exercise in generating fake news and misrepresenting parliamentary votes by the likes of *The London Economic* or TheyWorkForYou. We have seen some disgraceful abuse of colleagues, particularly female colleagues, and attacks on their offices. Last week, somebody even threatened to cut the brakes on my car because they did not like my last speech in an Opposition day debate. Unfortunately, Opposition day debates are fast becoming to effective scrutiny and democratic engagement what “Mrs Brown’s Boys” is to quality television and comedy.

9.33 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab) [V]: Children cannot learn when they are hungry, and children who are malnourished cannot possibly reach their potential or lead happy and fulfilling lives. Last week, we saw another appalling episode in the Government’s approach to the wellbeing of children in the delivery of food parcels. The parcels, which were nearly identical to the Government guidance on food parcel content, were an insult. It is time that the Government treated families with respect and gave parents the money that they need to feed their children. The Government’s refusal to provide free school meals over half-term is a real blow to families up and down the country.

The Government are failing families over food, and they are failing them too over access to online learning. They dithered over school closures. On 3 January, the Prime Minister said that primary schoolchildren should “absolutely” be in school in those areas where schools are open; then the very next day, he changed his mind and announced that schools across England must move to remote provision from the following day except for vulnerable children and the children of key workers. Yet again, this Government heaped pressure on families, leaving them practically no time to sort out childcare, and yet again, they created chaos for teachers and school support staff, giving them insufficient time to prepare. The Government have been warned repeatedly about the very large number of children and young people who do not have a device and access to the internet. Hundreds of thousands of pupils are still waiting to get connected. Instead of delivering the equipment that pupils need, the Government redefined those children

“who may have difficulty engaging with remote education at home (for example due to a lack of devices or quiet space to study)”

as vulnerable. As a result, there has been a massive increase in the number of children attending schools during this lockdown. A primary school teacher in my constituency wrote to me, saying:

“Overall we have 50% of children in school and my class actually has 70% of children in school...I am working to meet the needs of my class and then coming home to meet the needs of my home learners”.

The Government are causing unnecessary stress to teachers, pupils and parents. They are also putting at risk the public health programme by increasing the risk of infection in our communities. What is more, they are putting our less affluent communities at the highest increased risk of infection, fuelling existing health inequalities. Did the Government not think this through? Their disregard for the health outcomes of those who are disadvantaged, and cannot afford space or laptops for their children and the people who teach them, is shameful.

Instead of reclassifying children as vulnerable, the Government should make sure that every child has internet access at home if they need it. They must make sure that pupils who are eligible for free school meals get the support that they need all year round, and set out an ambitious strategy to tackle child poverty that addresses low pay and insecure work. They must rebuild the social security system, and finally, they must put the health and wellbeing of children at the heart of Government policy.

9.36 pm

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con) [V]: It is generous of the Opposition to call a debate on an area of policy in which the Government are leading the way. Ministers, faced with a backdrop to public policy decisions that is the most challenging possible, have worked tirelessly to deliver. Across the country most people have made huge efforts in response to covid, none more so than our teachers. I have seen the efforts made by teachers in Stoke-on-Trent, who deserve all our thanks for continuing the learning of our young people and protecting the most vulnerable. We are all struggling, and it is right that we debate how the Government’s good intentions can be delivered most effectively, especially for the most vulnerable.

The Government are not alone in having a responsibility to tackle this crisis: we all share a responsibility for our younger and future generations. Unfortunately, not everyone has recognised this. It is appalling to see some Labour-backed unions playing politics and doing everything possible to prevent the learning of our young people, even suggesting that remote learning is an invasion of privacy, when we all know that it is possible to use a filter on most remote platforms. The Government were right to try to keep schools open for as long as possible, and I know they are keen to get schools reopened as soon as they can. No matter how good remote learning is, it is a poor substitute, and I know from teachers in Stoke-on-Trent South that the last time pupils returned to school from lockdown, there was a notable performance gap, especially among the most disadvantaged pupils.

Schools being closed also has a more serious consequence. Last week, I met remotely with representatives of New Era, which provides domestic abuse services in Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire—I am grateful to them for sharing their insights. It is worrying that the number of

[Jack Brereton]

children and young people seeking support has dropped nationally by 6,000, while the number of domestic violence victims has increased significantly during lockdown. I hope that issue will be investigated further. According to the Local Government Association, referrals to social care have tragically increased to a 10-year high.

Lockdown has also hit a whole range of families mentally and financially when it comes to juggling their work and childcare responsibilities. In many cases, the strain has been too hard, and the school and community support networks that families rely on are just not there now. It is therefore particularly welcome that through the Government's covid winter grant scheme, Stoke-on-Trent City Council received over £1 million to support the hardest-hit families. As a father of a three-year-old, I am personally grateful that the Government have also kept early years education open to all, and I am glad that support bubbles, which provide vital support for families at this very difficult time, have been maintained.

As we get the virus under control thanks to everyone's efforts, and with the increased roll-out of vaccines, there is understandably a real eagerness among parents to get children back into the classroom as soon as possible. When we do reopen, we must ensure that there is intense catch-up, so that no pupil is left behind.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): We will go back to Yasmin Qureshi.

9.39 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab) [V]: The provision of home schooling is really important, because in the lockdown last year we saw that education provision for those in the private sector was very different from that for those in state schools. We all know that the state school budget is a bare minimum, and the schools were not able to respond to the crisis properly.

The Office for National Statistics reports that 700,000 11 to 18-year-olds had no home internet access from a suitable device, and 68% said that they could not do their work without it. For some reason, last year the Government decided to cut the allocation of laptops by 80%. They have now found another £100 million to get more laptops, but we know that £135 million is required.

Last year, when Scotland used predicted grades for exam results, the Government caused another problem that affected poor people and students in state schools by insisting on using the algorithm. Many constituents rang me about their futures, crying their hearts out, and although the Government did a U-turn, it was too late for some of them.

Now the Government have cancelled GCSEs and A-levels, which I welcome. However, no decision has been made on the BTEC, which about 1 million students will be taking. My local community college principal, Bill Webster, contacted me to ask what he should be doing. In the end, he decided to cancel the BTEC. I have to say, I agree with him. Frankly, the lack of preparation by the Government is unacceptable.

On food provision, since 2010 in my constituency child poverty has gone up from 25% to 39%. That is unacceptable, bearing in mind that we are the fifth largest economy in the world. Recently, we saw those food

packages—£5-worth of food from a company given £30. It is not surprising that the company is linked to the Tory party. We have also had countless PPE procurement scandals from using the VIP lane without scrutiny. I ask the Government why track and trace was given not to local authorities, but to Serco, whose bosses are connected with the Conservative party.

A number of Conservative Members have said that we in the Labour party are making a party political point. We are not. The fact is that the children who are suffering the most tend to be in our constituencies, and this Government have not bothered about them. The Government should provide decent food and decent education.

9.42 pm

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Thank you for squeezing me in, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I take the opportunity to add my thanks to the teachers and parents, but let us also remember the children themselves, who are working hard in awful circumstances to further their education. However, hungry children do not learn. Last Friday alone, I was contacted by five constituents who, faced with the withdrawal of vouchers, simply would not have enough food to feed their children. The cost of living has been raised because children have to stay and eat at home—not by much, but so many families are living on the margins that it does not take much to push them over the line into absolute poverty.

Most of those families are in work. In insecure, low-paid work and facing rising household debt, they rely on food banks and voluntary aid run by churches, community groups, Feeding Britain or, in my area, the brilliant Welcome Network. Next time hon. Members who support the Government go to a photo opportunity at a food bank, they should remember that, in Chester at least, not one volunteer wants food banks to continue a day more than they must, or thinks that they are a thing to be celebrated—they are a mark of shame and of the failure of our society and the Government.

The Government must start taking this seriously, not lurching as we seem to do from one crisis to the next, as they face the anger of the public, roused by Marcus Rashford. The Government need to invest and to review food for children in the whole day and the whole week—Healthy Start vouchers, universal credit, free school meals and support during school holidays all need to be joined up, as the Government look at whether they are fit for purpose.

Last March, I raised with the Minister the clawback of unspent money from free school meals. I am still unclear about whether things have changed. Things will not change until the level of in-work poverty is properly addressed in this country. It drags the country down not only economically, but socially and morally. It now seems as if there is appetite for real change and real justice from the Government.

9.44 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) in what has been a heavily over-subscribed debate. I regret the fact that we will not be able to deal with every single speech individually.

In closing the debate for the Opposition, let me return us to some fundamentals. First and foremost, this place matters, resolutions of this House matter and this vote matters. It is about whether families receive the money they need to make sure that no child goes hungry. It is about whether we trust parents to spend that money, or whether we prefer to see it top-sliced and going into the pockets of others. It is about getting every child online, making sure that no child learning from home is excluded from education. Frankly, for all the complaints about politics, which always strike me as ironic in the House of Commons, this motion would not be necessary if the Government had simply been doing their job.

The second fundamental is that it is our responsibility—the responsibility of all Members of the House, whether on the Opposition Benches, the Government Benches or the Government Back Benches—to expect high standards from Ministers and to hold them to those high standards on behalf of our constituents. We all recognise that the Government have a difficult job in these most extraordinary circumstances. That is why we sought to be a constructive Opposition, facilitating the passage of Government business, often with little debate and insufficient scrutiny. It is why we supported a range of measures brought forward to help our country through the pandemic.

However, we should not and will not be bystanders to the level of failure we have seen from the Department for Education: the free school meals rows, with Ministers not once, not twice, but three times having to be dragged to do the right thing; the nine months it has taken to deliver 700,000 laptops and 50,000 dongles, which still falls so far short of what is needed; the exams debacle last year that saw the futures of young people plunged into chaos—and worse still, no plan for this year either; the way in which the Department for Education has short-changed schools, leaving headteachers worried about how they will balance the books by the end of the year and whether they have put enough funding into their safety measures; the fact that the Government failed to listen on testing, and rushed out a plan on the last day of term, only to change those plans again and again and again. They announced a plan for the January reopening during the school holidays and then changed it again and again and again—on one occasion changing the helpful infographic on the Department for Education's social media channels three times within a matter of hours, such was the confusion and chaos—allowing millions of children to return on the first day of term, only to close schools the very same day, having told those headteachers, parents and children that that absolutely would not happen.

We cannot praise staff in schools and school leaders in one breath and then in the next defend the leadership they have been subjected to under this Secretary of State for Education. If the Prime Minister had any judgment, he would have sacked the Secretary of State, and if the Secretary of State had any shame, he would have resigned. That is the problem I have with the speeches we heard from Government Members this evening: the tyranny of low expectations—expectations for other people's children that they would never accept for their own. On free school meals, it is not only that the poor quality delivered by providers was so obviously abysmal but the fact that it only barely fell short of the standards

that the Department set for those providers, in collusion with those providers, with maybe a couple of tins of meat, a tin of sweetcorn or a couple of tomatoes missing. That is absolutely not the sort of lunch any Member of this House would expect for their children.

I mentioned the delay in getting the laptops and dongles out, but here is the real crux of it: even if the Government deliver the 1.3 million laptops they promised—they still have not told us when those laptops will arrive—that still falls well short of the demand that we know exists, with 1.8 million children not having access to a device at home, and ignores the reality confronting many parents. As we heard from one of our own this evening, even if there is a laptop at home, and maybe an iPad too, it does not mean that a parent with more than one child—maybe two or three—has devices for them all.

We heard a rosy picture painted by the hon. Member for Bury South (Christian Wakeford), who told us that there is no problem in Bury—everyone is fine. That was curious, because the cabinet member for children's services there tells me this evening that, in fact, the laptops are on order, and if those laptops arrive, perhaps then there will be fewer children in overcrowded classrooms. Right now, they are in school because the Government did not get them a device. As we heard so powerfully from my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Feryal Clark), there is example after example, school after school, where we have not seen sufficient provision of laptops.

But the most fundamental failure of all is that we went into this pandemic with a digital divide. We went into this pandemic with a widening attainment gap. We went into this pandemic with rising child poverty. It is no good Government Members talking about social policy as if it had just been invented; the last Labour Government lifted nearly 1 million children out of poverty. If they want our help, we will help them to end child poverty; the problem is the poverty of ambition from the Government.

We cannot surrender to the idea that any of this is good enough. We cannot give in to the inevitability of higher poverty, lower standards in education and a wider gap in attainment because of a pandemic. Nor should any Member of the House give in to the idea that this House does not matter, that the Government should ignore the will of the House or that Members should sit on their hands when something as fundamental as keeping every child learning and fed is up for debate and decision.

On the Opposition side of the House, we are ambitious for our country. We are ambitious for every child. We are ambitious that beyond this difficult and dark period of our national story, there is a better and brighter future to be built. We are willing to work on a cross-party basis if the mission is there to end child poverty. We are willing to work on a cross-party basis to get every child learning. We are willing to work on a cross-party basis to get children back to school as quickly as possible. The problem is not a willingness to co-operate, the problem is not politics; the problem is leadership, a lack of ambition from this Government and the grotesque display of incompetence we have seen from Ministers in the Department for Education throughout this pandemic.

9.51 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Vicky Ford): This Government want to see children, young people and adults fully connected so that they can access our world-class education, and we recognise the importance of a nutritious lunch to help children concentrate while they learn. I thank all the Members who have spoken in tonight's debate. Many of them have taken the time to thank staff in schools, and I agree with them. I say thank you to our schools, but I also thank our early years services, our colleges, our social workers who support vulnerable children, our families—and I say thank you to our children, too.

We must all do everything we can to support those who need help most at this time. On free school meals, the Prime Minister has said again and again that no child should go hungry because of this pandemic, and every single Member of this House agrees. Children should not miss out on a school lunch because school is closed to them. The contents of some of the lunch parcels that we saw on social media last week were completely unacceptable. Lunch parcels should be balanced and nutritious. The Secretary of State for Education and I immediately met leading school food suppliers to demand urgent action to make sure that lunch parcels are of a high standard.

We are in a global pandemic and no one should be profiteering on free school meal contracts, but some Opposition Members suggested that those contracts were with the Government. That is simply not true. Schools are responsible for their relationships with their own caterers—through the local authority if the local authority runs schools. Schools are doing a phenomenal job at this time. If parents have a problem with a school meal parcel, they should contact the school first to resolve it, but if that does not sort it out, we have set up a hotline so that parents can call us. The small number of complaints that we have already received have been individually investigated and sorted.

Schools can decide whether to offer lunch parcels or local vouchers, or use the national voucher scheme. Some schools and parents prefer those parcels, because that helps them keep in contact at this challenging time. The all-party parliamentary group on school food recommends and supports the use of lunch parcels. That all-party group is chaired by a Labour MP.¹

It is up to schools to decide how they want to sort out their own provision, but our national voucher scheme has reopened today. As of 5 o'clock this evening, more than 6,500 orders had been placed by schools, worth a total of £12.7 million. Parents have already started converting over £1.1 million-worth of codes into supermarket vouchers. That is well ahead of the schedule expected.

The current advice on school meals covers the time up to half-term, because that is the period when we currently know schools will for many children remain restricted. However, I want to be absolutely clear that children will be receiving food over February half-term. We started planning for that many months ago when we announced the £170 million covid winter grant scheme. Many Members, including my hon. Friends the Members for Winchester (Steve Brine), for Scunthorpe (Holly Mumby-Croft) and for Darlington (Peter Gibson) spoke about how it is working in their own constituencies

with parcels, vouchers or holiday clubs. The covid winter grant scheme is there to support the most vulnerable families, including children not of school age. It is there to help not only with food, but with other essentials such as energy bills. It is there to help with food for the whole day, not just at lunchtime. It is there for families and individuals who need extra support at this time. It was there in the Christmas holidays and it will be there through term-time. It will be there at half-term.

We have also announced our brilliant holiday activities and food programme, which will run all across the country from next Easter. My right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), my hon. Friend the Member for Bury South (Christian Wakeford), my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) and my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) all praised the scheme. It means that eligible children in every local authority area will be able to access healthy food and take part in fun activities over Easter, summer and Christmas if they need that—food, fun and friendship.

On technology, during the summer term we delivered more than 220,000 laptops and tablets, prioritising children with a social worker, care leavers and disadvantaged 10-year-olds. We have now distributed over three quarters of a million. Just last week, the Government confirmed the purchase of a further 300,000, which will take the total number of laptops and tablets we will be distributing up to £1.3 million. That is on top of the 2.9 million that were already owned by schools before the start of the pandemic. We are literally ordering and delivering laptops and other devices as fast as manufacturers can make them, at a time of peak global demand. Some 139,000 devices were delivered between 4 and 11 January—the first week of term. It is a phenomenal logistical effort.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) asked about BT. We ran a pilot in partnership with BT to provide our children and young people with free access to a BT wi-fi hotspot, but we did not extend it because the pilot found that it did not suitably meet the needs of children and young people for a reliable and consistent internet connection. However, we have partnered with all the UK's leading mobile providers, including BT, to provide free data uplifts to disadvantaged families. We have provided 54,000 4G wireless routers and we will continue to provide more. They have a roaming sim card so the router can find the strongest signal for 4G locally, making them more reliable even in areas where the signal may not be strong. We have extended our technology programme to 16 and 17-year-olds, many of whom already got devices through the bursary scheme. We are also extending more technology to our adult learners, because we support everyone who wants to access education at any stage of life.

My hon. Friends the Members for Ipswich, and for Henley (John Howell), mentioned the importance of accessibility for those with special educational needs and disabilities. There has been massive progress and innovation in this area during the pandemic, which will make a huge difference for some of our most vulnerable children.

The best place for children and young people to learn is at school, and I am very proud that we are one of the few countries that have kept schools open for our most vulnerable children. We know that it is not possible for

1. [Official Report, 21 January 2021, Vol. 687, c. 6MC.]

all to attend at this time, but we are doing everything in our power to make remote education a reality for all. No child should go hungry because of the pandemic. We are prepared. We are providing free school meals to children over the half-term and in the holidays ahead. Our Government projects do that and so much more.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Before I name the Tellers, let me make it absolutely clear, for those who appear not to understand our procedures, that it matters not on which side of the House a Member sits; if he or she chooses to oppose a motion, that is up to him or her. If two Tellers present themselves to me now to vote against a motion, I will take them at their word and at face value, and we will have a Division. There is no discretion for the Chair.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 272, Noes 0.

Division No. 198]

[9.59 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Anderson, Fleur
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Bardell, Hannah
Barker, Paula
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begum, Apsana
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blake, Olivia
Blomfield, Paul
Bonnar, Steven
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Ms Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, Ian
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Callaghan, Amy
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chamberlain, Wendy
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Douglas
Cherry, Joanna
Clark, Feryal
Cooper, Daisy
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette

Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Crawley, Angela
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Daby, Janet
Davey, rh Ed
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Davies-Jones, Alex
Day, Martyn
De Cordova, Marsha
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, Anneliese
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Doogan, Dave
Dorans, Allan
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eagle, Maria
Eastwood, Colum
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Elmore, Chris
Eshalomi, Florence
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farron, Tim
Farry, Stephen
Fellows, Marion
Ferrier, Margaret
Fletcher, Colleen
Flynn, Stephen
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Foy, Mary Kelly
Gardiner, Barry
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur
Girvan, Paul
Glendon, Mary
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lillian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanna, Claire
Hanvey, Neale
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hendry, Drew
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Rachel
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Sir George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Dame Diana
Johnson, Kim
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Jones, Ruth
Jones, Sarah
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Lake, Ben
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Linden, David
Lloyd, Tony
Lockhart, Carla
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lynch, Holly
MacAskill, Kenny
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McKinnell, Catherine
McLaughlin, Anne
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Mishra, Navendu
Monaghan, Carol
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Murray, James
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Nichols, Charlotte
Nicolson, John
Norris, Alex
O'Hara, Brendan
Olney, Sarah
Onwurah, Chi
Oppong-Asare, Abena
Osamor, Kate
Osborne, Kate
Oswald, Kirsten
Owatemi, Taiwo
Owen, Sarah
Paisley, Ian
Peacock, Stephanie
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Mr Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Pollard, Luke
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Jonathan
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robinson, Gavin
Rodda, Matt
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Shah, Naz
Shannon, Jim
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Siddiq, Tulip
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, Alyn
Smith, Cat
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Sobel, Alex
Starmer, rh Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo

Stone, Jamie
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sultana, Zarah
Tami, rh Mark
Tarry, Sam
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thompson, Owen
Thomson, Richard
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twist, Liz
Vaz, rh Valerie

Webbe, Claudia
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Whitley, Mick
Whittome, Nadia
Williams, Hywel
Wilson, Munira
Wilson, rh Sammy
Winter, Beth
Wishart, Pete
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Bambos Charalambous and
Jeff Smith

NOES

Tellers for the Noes: John Spellar and
Gill Furniss

Question accordingly agreed to.

The list of Members currently certified as eligible for a proxy vote, and of the Members nominated as their proxy, is published at the end of today's debates.

Resolved,

That this House believes that families need more support during school and college closures; and that those eligible should be guaranteed to receive the full value of free school meals for the duration of the school year, including during all holidays; and calls on the Secretary of State for Education to set a deadline to ensure that every learner has the resources required to learn remotely, and provide a weekly update to Parliament on implementing this.

Business without Debate

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Ordered,

That Fiona Bruce be discharged from the Backbench Business Committee and Imran Ahmad Khan be added.—(*Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

Covid-19: Schools

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*David T. C. Davies.*)

10.10 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): First, I recognise that the Speaker is very keen for us to take part in debates remotely where possible, and I fully respect that. However, given that teachers continue to deliver face-to-face education to essential workers' children in testing circumstances, it seemed only right that I should come here and represent them in person. Please be assured, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I have seen no one, and I am extra careful with my personal hygiene.

The past 10 months have been extraordinarily difficult for schools and our teachers. They have learned to adapt at very short notice in response to a seemingly ever-changing environment. If nothing else, today I want to recognise this extraordinary effort, and the hard work of headteachers and their staff across west Cornwall and on Scilly, and around the UK.

The environment has been no less challenging for the Department for Education, which, rather than setting the agenda, finds itself sandwiched between the Department of Health and Social Care, whose job is, rightly, to get on top of this dreadful disease, and the Treasury, whose concern for livelihoods and jobs is equally valid. I am not here to find fault in anything or anyone, but rather to represent my constituents, who include teachers and parents, and see what can be done to reset the relationship with frontline teaching staff and the Department for Education as we set about 2021.

As I have children learning from home, I now share my living room with teachers, who present themselves each morning, in among the Thomas family chaos, via iPad screens to give my boys the best start in life. I see at first hand the engagement, commitment, patience and interactive capabilities of our teachers. I am in unity with many other parents on this, I am sure: let me put on record how ridiculously challenging it is to keep just two school-age children head down and eyes forward for any length of time at home. If my wife and I are alone in this, then please will someone send me the tonic they are using on their children?

Prior to this pandemic, I made it a habit to visit a school each week—I have at least 50 across the patch—so I have a reasonable idea of the challenges that schools face in normal times. Since March, I have kept in close communication with a number of headteachers, so that I can support them where possible, raise parents' concerns in a constructive manner, and understand the Herculean efforts the schools have made to keep education going.

I said at the start that there is a need to reset the relationship between our teachers and the Department for Education. This unprecedented situation presents unavoidable difficulties. I fully accept this, as do our schools. However, there are some small tweaks that would make the world of difference, and I have identified these under three headings: communication, expectation and recognition. None of these will come as any surprise, I am sure, but it is important that they be laid out clearly.

From the outset, communication has been challenging for schools. Often they hear changes to guidance via the media first. Just as they are set to down tools for a

much-needed rest at a weekend or school holiday, the requirements for schools change, and heaven and earth must be moved to inform teachers, support staff and parents. This guidance often comes out in yards of text, and then is shortly revised, but headteachers cannot always see what has changed. If the revisions were easily identifiable, it would be a leap forward for hard-pressed headteachers and their senior school managers. Last-minute changes in guidance can lead to confusion and frustration, and put schools at loggerheads with parents.

I fully support the Government's determination to keep schools open and, where possible, to keep exams on the table. However, I hope we have learned that nothing is certain and that schools would be better served if they were able to anticipate various scenarios, so that they can be prepared to an extent. The landscape is unknown and has been for some time, and we must find a way to communicate with schools what the outcomes may be based on the rate of infection. The stress on children and staff should not be underestimated. If the profession is more involved in the process effectively, many pitfalls could be avoided. Schools have the experience to identify what will be the results of certain decisions before the mistake happens.

In relation to communication, all schools have a robust complaints procedure. Surely it is for us to stress that parents who have concerns about remote provision are encouraged to talk to the headteacher and follow the complaints procedure, rather than revert to Ofsted from the outset. I was pleased to hear the Secretary of State encourage parents to refer to schools in relation to free school meals. Driving division between parents and teaching staff is not in the interest of children's education and serves to wear down teaching staff further. It would be a helpful step if the Department for Education made it clear that parents should talk to schools in the first instance when they have a concern.

The expectation on our schools has been quite extraordinary, and their response has largely met that expectation. Who anticipated this time last year that we would be asking schools to stay open for essential workers' children while teaching all other pupils at home? I have nothing but admiration for teachers who have navigated this seismic challenge. Teaching a group of children face to face and appreciating the individual curiosities of each child, responding to their personalities and capabilities and walking hand in hand as they grow, learn and develop is a most rewarding vocation. To be frank, very little of that can be replicated via a flat screen, and I imagine that thousands of teachers are exhausted and demotivated because the very act of classroom teaching has been so impacted due to social distancing and remote teaching, with schools now largely closed. These measures cannot and should not be ignored—they are important—but the impact on teachers should not be underestimated. We must work to reassure teachers that there is a way through this and keep them on board.

I want to raise some specific examples of the expectation we place on teachers. The first is the expectation in relation to essential workers' children. The Government have said that children of essential workers and children who do not have good connectivity can go to school. In some cases in my constituency, that has led to two thirds of the classroom turning up. Can the Government set

out clear criteria for essential workers, so that those who need it least are the lowest priority and schools have the opportunity to refuse when it is absolutely necessary?

There is the expectation on school budgets. Cornwall Council advised me that pupil premium funding will be allocated using October data, rather than January data, despite the changes in family circumstances due to the pandemic. Can the Minister confirm which data should be used to allocate the pupil premium and, in relation to that, free school meals? Furthermore, schools tell me that they cannot claim additional funding if they hold a reserve, yet they are told to hold a reserve for staff pay, cash flow and so on. For example, covid-related staff absence is not covered by insurance and is proving costly for schools in my constituency. Added to that, teachers are expected—and, rightly, willing—to deliver remote learning, yet I am aware of staff who still do not have adequate IT equipment. Can the Minister survey schools to identify how significant those problems are?

There is also the expectation on covid testing. Schools have been told to set up testing capacity for pupils and staff, but I am aware of a concern among schools and parents about whether this is an appropriate additional expectation on school staff. I am also aware of schools that feel they cannot accept pupils face to face unless parents consent to these covid tests. Could the Minister clarify what schools are expected to do and whether children can be barred from school-based learning if parents are concerned about the testing regime? We are in danger of another expectation on schools that serves to damage the relationship with parents.

Finally, I turn to recognition. As I said at the outset, if nothing else, I want to put on record my appreciation of and respect for schools and all school staff. If there was any particular time to appreciate the investment that our school staff make in our children, it must be now. I believe there needs to be a wider debate about the attitude to teachers as a profession generally. We must regain the confidence of schools that decision makers understand the grassroots of education. To do this, we must up our game in regard to consultation and trust in the workforce. That will deliver the best model for all our children. I honestly believe that there is a need for further respect and trust, which I do not believe for a minute is anything but the Department's intention.

Looking forward positively, there are schools that have excelled at delivering a comprehensive teaching programme directly into people's homes. Will the Department for Education look at permitting schools with this proven track record of quality remote learning to offer this to children who, for various reasons, do not access mainstream education in normal times? We all know that before the pandemic, there were many parents and many children who, for whatever reason, could not fit in or were not attending mainstream education. There are huge numbers of children in my constituency who are homeschooled. Even after the first lockdown, I began the conversation with the Department about whether, where that is the case and where it is unavoidable, schools that are good at remote learning could enrol these children in school and involve them in its teaching environment.

To conclude, I hope that the Minister can instruct his Department and senior figures in Government to look for ways to improve communication, balance resource and advice with the expectation we rightly have for our

[Derek Thomas]

schools, and find ways of praising the fantastic work of teachers wherever and however possible. They have been incredible and continue to do what they do in an extraordinary environment. Having had my children home for most of last year, I, for one, truly appreciate the work of our teachers.

10.21 pm

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): May I first congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) on securing this very important Adjournment debate? I am delighted to be able to take part in it and I thank him very much indeed. He and I have much in common: we are both Members of Parliament from the south-west, we both have very rural and coastal constituencies, and we both have fishing and farming communities. However, I like to think that West Dorset maybe leads the way a little bit in education. Of course, I was schooled in Sherborne—it was also the town of the school of Alan Turing, who solved the Enigma code during the second world war.

This pandemic has touched every aspect of society, and, as hon. Members will know, we have discussed and debated those extensively. Despite the fact that some have been urging schools to close, not least some unions, may I commend the Government and the Minister, particularly, for wanting to keep them open and doing all he can to do so? But the reality is that schools, headteachers and their teams are making valiant efforts to continue educating our children—their pupils—no matter what circumstances they face. While school is closed for many children in West Dorset, I have at least one school with 60% of its children who are children of critical workers, or who are those in particular need. I have been in regular contact with the headteachers in my constituency, and I have been consistently in awe of the way that they continue to handle the most difficult of situations.

Covid testing in schools has been a great logistical challenge, but none the less, our schools, particularly those in West Dorset, have been willing to put all those measures in place to carry on. Teachers across the nation, I know, have gone above and beyond to support our young people through the pandemic, which has been no mean feat. West Dorset schools have made the transition to online learning extraordinarily quickly, thereby ensuring that students do not fall behind. They have kept their doors open for the children of critical workers, as I said, and they have built covid-secure infrastructure entirely from scratch in many cases.

The Government have kept schools open for as long as possible to reduce the disruption to education, and I know that the decision to close them was not taken lightly. Despite the short notice for many of these decisions, teachers in my constituency have been enormously responsive to these changing circumstances. Staff classed as clinically vulnerable or shielding have been unable to go to work, sometimes for their own safety, while frequent and unfortunately necessary isolations have contributed to some staffing arrangements being under pressure. Those staff able to come in have indeed put in extraordinarily long hours, and I commend them all for that. This is despite some of the difficulties they face and some people undermining their efforts, writing letters urging teachers and staff to refuse to come to work. We are privileged to have such a committed teaching profession.

I have been personally very moved by the many emails and replies from teachers, sharing with me what they have done, as I am sure has been the case for my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives—the weekends they have given up to prepare for new guidance, new processes and new arrangements. I would particularly like to mention special needs schools, which I know have had a particularly tough time.

I want to make particular mention of the schools that I know have totally gone above and beyond in delivering education to our children in West Dorset: the Woodroffe school in Lyme Regis, the Gryphon School in Sherborne, Mountjoy School in Beaminster, St Mary's in Bridport, and Trent Young's Church of England Primary School and St Osmund's Middle School in Dorchester. There are many, many more in West Dorset that I would like to commend. Unfortunately, I do not have the time this evening to do that, but their work in education—for logistics, for care, for the health and support of their pupils—has been absolutely excellent.

Going forward, I would like to ask the Minister to consider, hopefully in wrapping up, that the vaccination of our teachers be put higher on to the agenda. I know how strongly he and many of his colleagues in the Department feel, but I know too that the teachers who have been in touch with me over the previous weeks would very much value it if he took that forward.

10.26 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) on securing this debate, and both him and my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) on their introductory speeches. My hon. Friend the Member for St Ives is right to pay tribute to the extraordinary way in which teachers, support staff and headteachers in the 50-plus schools in his constituency and elsewhere around the country have responded to the demands placed on them by the covid pandemic and by the Government's response to tackling it.

From introducing covid security measures in our schools over the summer holidays, maintaining and enforcing the new rules in schools during the summer term, increased hygiene—I am delighted to hear my hon. Friend's commitment on the personal hygiene front—increased hand washing, one-way systems and staggered breaks and lunch times for all pupils, while at the same time helping their pupils to catch up from the lockdown from March to July, to teaching the curriculum and continuing the work to prepare and improve the curriculum for online teaching, these have been demanding times for the profession. With high attendance rates and more than 99% of schools open throughout the autumn term, we should all have enormous admiration for the achievements of schools and their staff. Indeed, I very well remember visiting some of the schools in my hon. Friend's constituency just a few short years ago and meeting some of the very same teachers and support staff he referred to in his speech.

However, the situation has now changed again. It is vital that we take action, given the very high transmission rates, so since 5 January we have asked schools to limit attendance during the lockdown, because the Government are taking every possible measure to reduce overall social contacts, thus bringing down cases in the community

and protecting the NHS. This will undoubtedly have a big impact on children and schools once again. We will continue to review the restrictions on schools and ensure that children get back to face-to-face education as soon as possible, which I know is the preference of my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset. I suspect that deep down it is also the preference of my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives, despite all the support and the enjoyment he has with his children being at home.

In the meantime, we are doing everything we can to ensure that children continue to learn and make progress. Schools have always been required to assess and manage risk. Before the end of the summer term, we published clear guidance for the autumn so that they could put in place proportionate control measures in response to their risk assessments, while still providing their pupils with a high-quality education. The 11 control measures run from enhanced cleaning and ventilating occupied spaces to managing confirmed cases of the virus. This is a fast-moving situation, and as the pandemic has evolved, guidance for schools has been needed on a range of issues. I am aware of feedback on guidance, and I can assure my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives that we have made changes to improve our approach in response, making clear any changes at the start of documents, so that school staff can quickly see updates, without having to reread the whole document.

During the current period of national restrictions we have asked schools to allow only vulnerable children and young people, and the children of critical workers to attend. The guidance is clear that families where at least one parent's work is critical can send their child to school, if required. If parents and carers who are critical workers can keep their children at home, they should do so. We know that every school will have a different number of children of critical workers who need to attend, and it is important that on-site provision is provided for these pupils, and schools should not limit attendance of these groups. That is because we are reducing overall social contact across areas and the country, rather than individually by each institution. The Department publishes weekly national level data on pupil attendance, and the data for 11 January shows that attendance in state primary schools in England was at 20% and attendance in state secondaries was at 4%, although this will of course vary on a school-by-school basis, as my hon. Friend has pointed out.

On 15 December, we announced the roll-out of rapid result asymptomatic testing in secondary schools for the workforce and for pupils, and I am pleased to hear that schools in St Ives are already benefiting from that. This month, we are also rolling out that programme to primary school staff. Primary schools should expect to receive a delivery of home testing kits from today. Schools can access workforce funding and military support to help them implement the programme, as well as engage volunteers through one of the national volunteering networks. Where schools are unable to identify enough staff or volunteers, they can call our helpline for additional support, which is provided on a case-by-case basis. Testing those without symptoms is vital in reducing the spread of covid-19, and these lateral flow tests will be able to indicate in just half an hour whether somebody has the virus. Participation in the programme requires the consent of the person being tested or their parents, if they are under 16. Pupils who are not taking part in

testing will still be able to attend school as normal, where they are eligible to attend, unless of course they develop symptoms or need to self-isolate after being in close contact with somebody who has tested positive. All those steps help make schools as safe as possible and will help limit the amount of time that pupils miss from the classroom in the future.

As my hon. Friend will know, the Government have a catch-up package worth £1 billion, including a catch-up premium, worth a total of £650 million, to support schools to make up for the impact of time outside the classroom. This academic year the forecast catch-up premium for Cornwall will be £5.8 million. Alongside that, we have a new £350 million national tutoring programme for disadvantaged pupils, which will increase access to high-quality tuition for the most disadvantaged young people, helping to accelerate their academic progress and tackling the attainment gap.

It is crucial that all children continue to learn during the lockdown, so we have updated the remote education guidance for schools to clarify and strengthen expectations, drawing on our evolving understanding of best practice in remote education. The Government are spending £400 million on remote education to help schools and colleges meet those expectations. That includes three quarters of a million laptops and tablets that have already been delivered to schools and local authorities since the start of the pandemic. A comprehensive package of support is available and the Department has also made £4.84 million available for the Oak National Academy, both for the summer term of the academic year 2019-20 and for the 2020-21 academic year, to provide video lessons in a broad range of subjects for reception to year 11. There have been 32 million views of those very high-quality lessons.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Ives raised the issue of funding, as he so often does on behalf of his constituents and schools. School budgets are rising by £2.6 billion in 2020-21, £4.8 billion in 2021-22 and £7.1 billion in 2022-23, compared with 2019-20. On average, schools are attracting 4.2% more per pupil in this financial year, compared with 2019-20, and will attract 3.3% more per pupil in 2021-22. This increase in funding will help schools with costs associated with the covid outbreak.

We have also provided additional funding to schools on top of existing budgets to cover unavoidable costs incurred between March and July 2020 due to the covid outbreak that could not be met from their budgets. Schools in my hon. Friend's constituency have received £94,238 so far through the first claims window of the covid exceptional costs fund, which supported schools with the most significant costs they faced between March and July. Schools nationally have received payments of more than £100 million for all claims within the published scope of the fund, and we are currently processing claims from the second window, which ran in December. We have also promised a further £78 million to support schools with the costs of rolling out testing this term.

We know that children and young people may be experiencing a wide variety of emotions in response to the coronavirus outbreak, such as anxiety, stress or low mood, and the return to remote learning for most will limit their social interaction with their peers. Some pupils may need support from their school to readjust—either to return to learning at home or to being in

[Nick Gibb]

school without some of their friends. Our £8 million Wellbeing-for-Education-Return training programme is supporting staff in schools and colleges to respond to the additional pressures that schools may be feeling as a direct result of the pandemic. My hon. Friends will be delighted to know that there are similar schemes to help teachers' wellbeing during this very pressured time.

Ultimately, it is our ambition to ensure that all pupils have the chance to make up for education lost during the pandemic, so that they can reach their potential in the long term. We are doing everything in our power so

that schools can make this happen. I heard what my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset said about prioritising vaccines for teachers. The Government are considering that, along with other critical workers in the second phase of the roll-out of the pandemic.

School leaders, teachers and support staff have done truly tremendous work since the start of the pandemic to maintain high-quality education for all their pupils. I thank them once again for their exceptional efforts.

Question put and agreed to.

10.37 pm

House adjourned.

Members Eligible for a Proxy Vote

The following is the list of Members currently certified as eligible for a proxy vote, and of the Members nominated as their proxy:

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Nigel Adams (Selby and Ainsty) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Imran Ahmad Khan (Wakefield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con)	Chris Loder
Stuart Anderson (Wolverhampton South West) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Margaret Beckett (Derby South) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Saqib Bhatti (Meriden) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op)	Sir Alan Campbell
Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Suella Braverman (Fareham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
James Brokenshire (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudon) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Anthony Browne (South Cambridgeshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Conor Burns (Bournemouth West) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP)	Sammy Wilson
Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD)	Sarah Olney
Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
James Cartledge (South Suffolk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD)	Sarah Olney
Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Theo Clarke (Stafford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dr Thérèse Coffey (Suffolk Coastal) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD)	Sarah Olney
Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Robert Courts (Witney) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Geoffrey Cox (Torridge and West Devon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jon Cruddas (Dagenham and Rainham) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
James Daly (Bury North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD)	Sarah Olney
Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gareth Davies (Grantham and Stamford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op)	Sir Alan Campbell
Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mims Davies (Mid Sussex) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dehenna Davison (Bishop Auckland) (Con)	Ben Everitt
Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Marsha De Cordova (Battersea)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Miss Sarah Dines (Derbyshire Dales) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op)	Sir Alan Campbell
Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP)	Sammy Wilson
Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Allan Dorans (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Ms Nadine Dorries (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP)	Patrick Grady
Mark Eastwood (Dewsbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind)	Stuart Andrew
Ruth Edwards (Rushcliffe) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Alan Campbell (Ogmore) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op)	Sir Alan Campbell
Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
George Eustice (Camborne and Redruth) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op)	Sir Alan Campbell
Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Laura Farris (Newbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD)	Sarah Olney
Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance)	Sarah Olney
Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind)	Stuart Andrew
Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mark Fletcher (Bolsover) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mike Freer (Finchley and Golders Green) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op)	Sir Alan Campbell
Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP)	Sammy Wilson
John Glen (Salisbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Mr Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Michael Gove (Surrey Heath) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Damian Green (Ashford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Kate Griffiths (Burton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
James Grundy (Leigh) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Matt Hancock (West Suffolk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP)	Ben Lake
Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP)	Patrick Grady

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Rebecca Harris (Castle Point) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
James Heappey (Wells) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Chris Heaton-Harris (Daventry) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gordon Henderson (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op)	Sir Alan Campbell
Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Darren Henry (Broxton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Anthony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD)	Sarah Olney
Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Adam Holloway (Gravesham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Paul Holmes (Eastleigh) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Sir George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
John Howell (Henley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD)	Sarah Olney
Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Sajid Javid (Bromsgrove) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mark Jenkinson (Workington) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Boris Johnson (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
David Johnston (Wantage) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Fay Jones (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Simon Jupp (East Devon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Robert Langan (High Peak) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con)	Mr William Wragg
Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ian Levy (Blyth Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Brandon Lewis (Great Yarmouth) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP)	Sammy Wilson
Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Jonathan Lord (Woking) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP)	Patrick Grady

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Shabana Mahmood (Birmingham, Ladywood) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Alan Mak (Havant) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Julie Marson (Hertford and Stortford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West)	Patrick Grady
Damien Moore (Southport) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD)	Sarah Olney
Penny Mordaunt (Portsmouth North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con)	Chris Loder
Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op)	Sir Alan Campbell
Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Lia Nici (Great Grimsby) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op)	Sir Alan Campbell
Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Guy Opperman (Hexham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP)	Sammy Wilson
Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Priti Patel (Witham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Christopher Pincher (Tamworth) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op)	Sir Alan Campbell
Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op)	Sir Alan Campbell
Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Will Quince (Colchester) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op)	Sir Alan Campbell
Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Nicola Richards (West Bromwich East) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Rob Roberts (Delyn) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP)	Sammy Wilson
Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dean Russell (Watford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op)	Sir Alan Campbell
David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC)	Ben Lake
Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP)	Sammy Wilson
Grant Shapps (Welwyn Hatfield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Alok Sharma (Reading West) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op)	Sir Alan Campbell
Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Chloe Smith (Norwich North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Royston Smith (Southampton, Itchen) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Amanda Solloway (Derby North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Jane Stevenson (Wolverhampton North East) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)	Sarah Olney
Sir Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Mel Stride (Central Devon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Rishi Sunak (Richmond (Yorks)) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP)	Patrick Grady

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op)	Sir Alan Campbell
Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Edward Timpson (Eddisbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Elizabeth Truss (South West Norfolk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Mr Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Ben Wallace (Wyre and Preston North)	Stuart Andrew
Dr Jamie Wallis (Bridgend) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
David Warburton (Somerset and Frome) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Suzanne Webb (Stourbridge) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Claudia Webbe (Leicester East) (Ind)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mrs Heather Wheeler (South Derbyshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
John Whittingdale (Malden) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Craig Williams (Montgomeryshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC)	Ben Lake
Gavin Williamson (Montgomeryshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD)	Sarah Olney
Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab)	Rachel Hopkins

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell
Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nadhim Zahawi (Stratford-on-Avon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab)	Sir Alan Campbell

Written Statements

Monday 18 January 2021

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Coronavirus-related Assistance: Industrial Development Act 1982

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): I am tabling this statement for the benefit of hon. Members to bring to their attention spend under the Industrial Development Act 1982. In addition to the obligation to report annually on spend under the Industrial Development Act, the Coronavirus Act 2020 created a new quarterly reporting requirement for spend which has been designated as addressing the effects of coronavirus. This statement fulfils that purpose.

The statement also includes a report of the movement in contingent liability during the quarter. Hon. Members will wish to note that measures such as local authority grants, the coronavirus job retention scheme and self-employed income support scheme, and tax measures such as the suspension of business rates are not provided under the Industrial Development Act 1982 and hence are not included below.

This report covers the second quarter of 2020, from 1 April to 30 June 2020, in accordance with the Coronavirus Act. The Q1 written ministerial statement was published on 9 July 2020.

Under the Coronavirus Act 2020, there is a requirement to lay before Parliament details of the amount of assistance designated as coronavirus related provided in each relevant quarter.

Spend under the Coronavirus Act 2020

In the period from 1 April to 30 June 2020, the following expenditures were incurred:

Actual expenditure of assistance provided by Her Majesty's Government from 1 April 2020 to 30 June 2020	£ 47,637,000
All expenditure of assistance provided by Her Majesty's Government from 25 March 2020	£ 47,637,000

Expenditure by Department

Actual expenditure of assistance provided by:

Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy	£ 47,600,000
Competition Appeal Tribunal	£ 37,000

Contingent liability under the Coronavirus Act 2020

Contingent liability of assistance provided by the Secretary of State from 1 April 2020 to 30 June 2020	£ 30,383,783,770
All contingent liability of assistance provided by the Secretary of State from 25 March 2020	£ 30,456,183,770

[HCWS715]

EDUCATION

Awarding Qualifications in 2021

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): On Friday 15 January, Ofqual and the Department for Education published a joint consultation outlining detailed

proposals for alternative arrangements for awarding general, vocational and technical qualifications in summer 2021.

This consultation, outlined in "Consultation on how GCSE, AS and A level grades should be awarded in summer 2021" and "Consultation on alternative arrangements for the award of VTQs and other general qualifications in 2021", will be open for two weeks ending on 29 January. Responses can be completed using the online response forms on www.gov.uk for GCSE, AS and A-levels and for vocational and technical qualifications.

In his statement to the House on 6 January, the Secretary of State confirmed proposals that students taking GCSE, AS and A-levels this summer should be awarded grades based on an assessment by their teachers. Teachers' judgement will be based on a range of evidence; Ofqual and the Department will consult on the evidence needed to inform teachers' assessments of their students' grades, including providing externally set papers to support their assessments. Teachers will be provided with training and guidance to support them.

We recognise that students who are not studying within a school or college, for example because they are home educated, must be able to be issued with a grade. We are seeking views on the proposals that would enable them to do so.

The consultation also proposes both that exam boards should provide information for schools and colleges to inform their own quality assurance, and that the exam boards themselves should undertake checks of schools' and colleges' processes and the evidence for the grades submitted. We propose that all students will have a route to appeal their grades.

The approach set out in the consultation for vocational and technical qualifications which are taken instead of or alongside GCSEs, AS and A-levels is consistent with the approach for these qualifications. For other general qualifications, such as Core Maths, Pre-U and the International Baccalaureate, the consultation also proposes the awarding approach should be similar to GCSEs, AS and A-levels.

The consultation proposes that those vocational and technical qualifications with practical exams and assessments which are required to demonstrate occupational competence for employment and apprenticeships should continue to take place where they can be delivered in line with public health guidelines, including remotely.

"On-demand" assessments of shorter, focused qualifications such as Functional Skills that can be delivered in line with public health guidelines, including remotely, should be permitted to continue to proceed.

The consultation seeks the views of students, parents and carers, teachers, school and college leaders before decisions are made on final arrangements. We will also take into account the views of further and higher education and employers, to ensure that young people can move onto the next stage of their lives.

[HCWS714]

Children's Social Care: Independent Review

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson): This Government are committed to levelling up across the country. In order to do this, it is absolutely vital that we start with children and families—particularly the

most vulnerable—so that we can realise the benefits of establishing firm and loving foundations, both to individuals and to society for generations to come.

Further to my written ministerial statement of 12 February 2020, I am making this statement to launch the independent review of children's social care, which was committed to in the Government's manifesto. I am pleased to inform hon. and right hon. Members that the review will be carried out by Josh MacAlister, who is the founder and chief executive of the children's social work charity Frontline. Josh brings both an understanding of the challenges facing the system that supports vulnerable children and families and experience of developing and implementing innovative solutions.

The review will start from children's experiences and look at the whole system of support, safeguarding, protection and care and the children's journey into and out of that system, including relevant aspects of preventive service that are provided to children and families as part of early help. It will engage with children, young people, adults and families with direct experience of children's social care, in order to ensure those individuals' views and lived experience are fully embedded in the review's work. The review will aim to improve children and young people's lives and outcomes and address major challenges facing the system.

I am placing copies of the terms of reference in the Libraries of the House, and it is also available on www.gov.uk alongside other documents that have accompanied the launch of the review.

[HCWS717]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

British Virgin Islands: Commission of Inquiry

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs and First Secretary of State (Dominic Raab): The UK is extremely concerned about the state of good governance in the British Virgin Islands (BVI).

A consistent and deeply troubling array of concerns have been put to the Governor by local institutions and the community. The Governor has set out these concerns to me. They include, but are not limited to:

Allegations of political interference and coercion in relation to appointments in the public service and statutory boards, the criminal justice system and individual criminal cases;

Claims that people in public service, media and community leaders have been intimidated to such a degree that they describe living in a climate of fear;

Allegations that funds set aside for struggling families during the pandemic may have been reallocated to political allies;

Concerns around spending on Government contracts without any proper procurement process;

Misuse of taxpayers' money on infrastructure and transport projects.

Against this backdrop, we are also concerned about the potential vulnerability of the islands to serious organised crime. The scale of this was made clear in November 2020, with the seizure of more than two tonnes of cocaine, worth just under £190 million.

Successive attempts have been made to address these concerns through local institutions, many of which have done commendable work to bring them to light. However, the scope and seriousness of the concerns are now beyond local capacity to address.

The UK Government are responsible for ensuring the security and good governance of BVI. We have a constitutional and moral duty to protect the interests of the people of BVI. We cannot ignore such serious allegations.

With this in mind, on 18 January, the Governor of BVI, supported by the UK Government, announced an independent Commission of Inquiry.

The Commission will inquire into whether there is information to substantiate claims that corruption, abuse of position and serious impropriety has taken place in public office in recent years, and it will make recommendations. The Commission will be led by the right honourable Sir Gary Hickinbottom, who will have the powers of a high court judge within the territory with respect to gathering evidence. The BVI Commission of Inquiry Ordinance makes provisions for the scope of the inquiry to be adjusted or extended should it prove necessary.

The Government expect the Commissioner to deliver his report to the Governor within six months. At this point, we hope that the UK and BVI will be able to consider the recommendations together in a constructive manner that best serves the people of BVI.

This Government's aim is to build stronger governance for the people of BVI and uphold our commitment to our overseas territories and their people.

[HCWS716]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Community Pharmacy and Care Home Vaccinations

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Nadhim Zahawi): I am tabling this statement for the benefit of hon. and right hon. Members to bring to their attention two contingent liabilities: one relating to clinical negligence liabilities incurred by pharmacy-led covid-19 vaccination sites between 1 January and 30 June 2021, and one relating to a targeted and time-limited state-backed indemnity to care homes, registered or intending to register as "Designated Settings", which are unable to obtain sufficient insurance cover.

On the first, Members will be aware that we have initiated the covid-19 vaccination programme to deliver the vaccine across England. As this programme continues to roll out, we are working with NHS England and NHS Improvement (NHSE/I) to stand up sites in every community.

NHSE/I intends to administer the covid-19 vaccine through trusts, general practice and community pharmacy-led settings to ensure adequate vaccination centre coverage across England. Healthcare professionals need clinical negligence indemnity for delivering covid-19 vaccines. This is provided through the existing state schemes in England for NHS trusts and GP practices.

However, community pharmacies are not covered by state indemnity and are obliged to obtain their own commercial insurance. Following engagement with community pharmacy representatives, our assessment was that the insurance market would not be able to comprehensively provide cover for this risk at such short notice, and we agreed the state indemnity.

Without adequate indemnity cover, pharmacies would be unable to commit to the programme. Their participation is crucial as they have been selected to fill geographical gaps in cover or where NHS capacity is such that they are unable to participate. Therefore, DHSC has provided a time-limited clinical negligence indemnity to community pharmacies to 30 June 2021, to enable them to engage at pace with this programme. The provision of such an indemnity enables pharmacy contractors to start to run services, while the Department and NHS England and NHS Improvement continue to work with the community pharmacy sector on a longer-term approach to insuring community pharmacy for covid-19 vaccinations. We had originally intended to time-limit this to the end of March but, with the decision to extend the period between vaccine doses, have decided to run the indemnity until the end of June.

All claims of clinical negligence will be managed through the provider of the current state-backed schemes—NHS Resolution—in line with the existing schemes.

The need for the indemnity was extremely urgent as pharmacy-led centres could not begin to vaccinate patients until this was in place and, indeed, vaccinations have begun at six centres as of 14 January 2021. Delaying would have postponed the roll-out of this vital aspect of the vaccination programme, restricting access to the vaccine in some areas of the country. We concluded that such a delay was not acceptable, and I hope it is clear why this was indeed a case of special urgency. Therefore, the normal 14 sitting days for consideration has on this occasion not been possible.

I would also like to update the House on the DHSC's scheme to provide a targeted and time-limited state-backed indemnity to care homes, registered or intending to register as "Designated Settings", which are unable to obtain sufficient insurance cover.

The Government are committed to ensuring the best care possible for people with covid-19. For people admitted to hospital who need social care support, we have worked closely with local authorities and the Care Quality Commission to register certain adult social care homes as designated settings. I welcome the response of the care sector to the demand for such care. It is our priority to ensure that people are discharged safely from hospital to the most appropriate setting, and that they receive the care and support they need.

I acknowledge the role of the insurance industry in continuing to provide cover, where possible, for this activity. However, we know that obtaining sufficient insurance to accept covid-19 positive patients and sign up to become a designated setting has been a barrier for some care home providers wishing to join the scheme. The designated setting scheme is for people who are medically fit for discharge from hospital (i.e., they do not require to be in an acute NHS bed) but whose ongoing care and support needs are such that they require full-time residential or nursing care. A large proportion of these people will already have been living in a care home.

The scheme forms part of wider policy on hospital discharge set out in "Hospital discharge service: policy and operating model"—August 2020—which enshrines a principle of "home first", whereby at least 95% of discharges from hospital should be to a person's own (private) home.

This is limiting the ability of a small number of local authorities to operationalise designated settings capacity, and in other areas is limiting the expansion of such capacity in response to rising demand.

Given the severity and immediacy of the pressures facing the NHS, we want to take all possible steps to remove obstacles to sufficient local designated settings provision. This includes ensuring that where the creation of designated settings has created barriers to insurance, the Government will introduce a targeted and time-limited indemnity offer to fill gaps in commercial cover.

The indemnity will cover clinical negligence, employer's and public liability where a care provider seeking to become a designated setting is unable to secure sufficient commercial insurance, or where an existing provider has been operating without sufficient cover. Employer's and public liability will be covered by a new indemnity scheme; clinical negligence will be covered by the clinical negligence scheme for trusts, an existing state scheme. The indemnity arrangements will be supervised by DHSC and administered by NHS Resolution. The indemnity will cover designated settings until the end of March 2021, with a review point in mid-February.

I regret that in this circumstance, due to the need to take this action urgently to support timely discharge from the NHS at this stage of the pandemic, the normal 14 sitting days for consideration has not been possible. A departmental minute has been laid in the House of Commons providing more detail on this contingent liability.

[HCWS718]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Planning and Heritage: Historic Statues, Plaques, Memorials and Monuments

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick):

Protecting our nation's heritage

I would like to update the House about the role of the planning system in relation to the protection of historic statues, plaques, memorials and monuments. I am concerned that, over the last few months, some such heritage assets may have been removed without proper debate, consultation with the public and due process.

Indeed, the removal of a statue in Bristol was an act of criminal damage. We should never tolerate criminal acts and mob rule.

This Government are committed to ensuring our nation's heritage is appropriately protected. It is important that all decisions on removing historic statues, plaques (which are part of a building and whose alteration or removal materially affects the external appearance of the building), memorials and monuments—even for a temporary period—are taken in accordance with the

law and following the correct process. Decisions to remove any such heritage assets owned by a local authority should be taken in accordance with its constitution, following consultation with the local community and interested parties, and the rationale for a decision to remove should be transparent.

The planning system plays a crucial role in conserving and enhancing our heritage. Under the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990, listed building consent from the local planning authority is required for the removal or alteration of a statue, plaque, memorial or monument which is designated as a listed building, or which forms part of a listed building, where it affects the special historic or architectural character of the listed building.

Paragraph 193 of the national planning policy framework already states that great weight should be given to the conservation of a designated heritage asset. Paragraph 195 also requires that where development will lead to substantial harm to a designated heritage asset, local planning authorities should refuse consent, unless it can be demonstrated that the substantial harm or total loss is necessary to achieve substantial public benefits that outweigh that harm or loss.

I would also like to remind local planning authorities of the current requirements to notify Historic England and the national amenity societies of applications involving the demolition of a listed building. In those cases where local planning authorities are minded to grant consent for the removal of a listed statue, plaque, memorial or monument despite an extant objection from Historic England or one of the national amenity societies, they are required to notify the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, who will then consider whether to call in the application or not. Where an extant objection is in relation to a listed building consent application made by Historic England or a local authority itself, the local planning authority must refer it to the Secretary of State for determination.

At present, these notification requirements do not apply in relation to grade II listed buildings where the removal of a statue, plaque, memorial or monument constitutes an alteration to a listed building rather than demolition. I intend to exercise my powers to direct local planning authorities that these types of application are subject to the same notification requirements as for applications involving the demolition of a listed building.

It is also important that the removal of historic statues, plaques, memorials and monuments which are not listed are subject to proper process. These heritage assets can often be well known local landmarks, but unless they meet certain size thresholds, their removal will not be currently classified as development for planning purposes and so is not subject to planning control.

I am today therefore setting out my intention to make the removal of any historic unlisted statue, plaque, memorial or monument subject to an explicit requirement to obtain planning permission. I also intend to require local planning authorities to adhere to similar notification requirements as for listed building consent applications involving listed statues, plaques, memorials and monuments. This will require directions and changes to secondary legislation including the permitted development right for the demolition of buildings.

In considering any applications to remove a historic statue, plaque, memorial or monument (whether a listed building or not), local planning authorities should have regard to the Government's clear policy on heritage (summarised as "retain and explain") as set out by the Digital Infrastructure Minister—the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman)—to Parliament on 25 September 2020. This statement now forms part of national planning policy and should be applied accordingly.

Historic statues, plaques, memorials and monuments should not be removed before a decision on the application is made.

I would also draw local planning authorities' attention to the advice Historic England has published to support decision making involving heritage whose story or meaning has become challenged ("Checklist to help local authorities to deal with contested heritage listed building decisions"). As they note, "Our stance on historic statues and sites which have become contested is to retain and explain them; to provide thoughtful, long-lasting and powerful reinterpretation that responds to their contested history and tells the full story."

The new legislation and directions referred to in this statement will come into effect in the spring.

I would like to make clear that, as the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, I have wide discretion to "call in" planning applications or recover appeals for my own determination, not least because of the controversy attached to such decisions. I will not hesitate to use those powers in relation to applications and appeals involving historic statues, plaques, memorials or monuments where I consider such action is necessary to reflect the Government's planning policies as set out above.

In conclusion, this Government believe it is always right to examine Britain's history, but the knee-jerk removal of statues does harm rather than good. Our aim should be to use heritage to educate people about all aspects of Britain's past rather than censoring our shared British history.

[HCWS713]

Petitions

Monday 18 January 2021

OBSERVATIONS

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Accessibility of leisure attractions

The petition of the residents of Stroud and the surrounding area,

Declares that all leisure attractions including theme parks should be adjusted to ensure that they are accessible to all citizens; further that all attractions built in the future should be fully accessible where possible to ensure that all disabled visitors are provided with equal dignity, an equal opportunity to experience the leisure attractions and equal value of money for their trips as all other guests; and further that guests should not be required to take disability tests.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to take into account the concerns of the petitions and take immediate action to ensure that all leisure attractions are accessible to all individuals irrespective of ability.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Siobhan Baillie, *Official Report*, 18 November 2020; Vol. 684, c. 434.]

[P002627]

Observations from The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston):

The Equality Act 2010 requires service providers, including tourist attractions such as theme parks, to make reasonable adjustments to improve access to disabled customers of all ages. Disabled customers should not be placed at a substantial disadvantage to non-disabled customers. This is an anticipatory duty, meaning that service providers should plan on the assumption that a proportion of their customers will be disabled and make adjustments for this, rather than waiting, for example, for specific requests for wheelchair access.

The Equality Advisory and Support Service can be contacted via its website, telephone or textphone by anyone who believes that they, or their children, have been discriminated against in the provision of services. This Service can contact a service provider on the customer's behalf to discuss any particular concerns raised. It also liaises with the Equality and Human Rights Commission, which has powers to enforce the provisions of the Equality Act—although in most cases taking legal action will be a matter for individuals who believe that they have experienced discrimination.

More broadly, the Government are taking a number of steps to improve accessibility within the tourism sector. VisitEngland, the national tourist board, has developed a dedicated web portal providing tailored business advice to tourism businesses, including guidance on how to welcome guests with different access needs. VisitEngland has also made sure that its promotional and marketing activities are inclusive. For example, its

Escape the Everyday campaign worked in partnership with Channel 4 to launch the Mission: Accessible series, which showcases accessible places to visit across the UK.

At the Budget last year, the Chancellor announced a £30 million Changing Places Fund to increase the provision of Changing Places toilets in public buildings, including leisure buildings and theme parks.

The Government have also committed to publishing a National Strategy for Disabled People.

The Tourism Sector Deal, published in June 2019, set out an ambition to make the UK the most accessible destination in Europe by 2025. We will continue to engage with stakeholders to assess how we can support inclusive tourism as the sector recovers from covid-19.

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Banning of unpaid work trials

The petition of residents of the constituency of Glasgow North,

Declares that unpaid trial shifts are open to exploitation and can be used by unscrupulous employers to take advantage of vulnerable people looking for a job; further that often unpaid trials are for minimum wage jobs and the people applying for them cannot afford to work for free but may have no other option; further that unpaid trial shift workers may also have to incur the cost of travelling to and from the trial shift as well as procuring a uniform; further that potential employees may feel as though they cannot say no to exploitative trials without risking their future livelihood; and further that it is unfair to force someone to work for hours without pay, and incur additional costs, for a job they might not even get.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to take action and ban all unpaid work trials.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Patrick Grady, *Official Report*, 18 November 2020; Vol. 684, c. 434.]

[P002629]

Observations from The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully):

UK employment law sets out the statutory minimum rights and responsibilities for individuals and employers in the workplace. The Government have always been absolutely clear that employers must take their employment responsibilities seriously and cannot simply opt out of them.

National minimum wage legislation provides that an individual who is 'working' for minimum wage purposes must be paid at least the national minimum wage or national living wage. Most workers in the UK who are over compulsory school age and who ordinarily work in the UK are entitled to be paid at least the minimum wage.

As part of a recruitment process, an individual may be asked by a prospective employer to carry out tasks, without payment, to help the employer to decide whether the individual has the skills and qualities required for the job.

An individual will generally be a 'worker' if they have a contract of employment or a contract to provide work or services. There may be a contract even though there is nothing in writing. Where an employer asks an individual to carry out a 'trial', 'test' or 'recruitment exercise', the individual may nevertheless be a 'worker' and entitled to minimum wage, depending on the circumstances of the case.

There are no definitive rules or tests. Work trials have to be assessed on a case-by-case basis by HMRC enforcement officers and, where necessary, by courts and tribunals. They will take account of the precise detail of the arrangements, including the duration and what the worker is being asked to do, and are likely to take account of the following factors:

- Whether a 'work trial' is genuinely for recruitment purposes;
- Whether the trial length exceeds the time that the employer would reasonably need to test the individual's ability to carry out the job offered;
- The extent to which the individual is observed while carrying out the tasks;
- The nature of the tasks carried out by the individual and how closely these relate to the job offered;
- Whether the tasks carried out have a value to the employer beyond testing the individual; and
- Whether trial periods are important (aside from recruiting) to the way the employer runs its business.

The Government are aware of reports of some unpaid trial work periods extending across more than one full shift or several days. Unpaid trials of this sort of length

in a real (not simulated) work environment are likely to create an entitlement to minimum wage in all but very exceptional circumstances. This is because what is done by the individual would almost certainly have substantial value to the employer rather than testing the individual's ability.

However, an unpaid trial work period lasting a few hours may be reasonable and not create an entitlement to minimum wage. This is because the main purpose would likely be to test the individual, and what is done would probably have little or no other value to the employer: the substance of the arrangement would concern recruitment rather than providing work. Unpaid work trial opportunities as part of a genuine recruitment process could help workers to gain substantive employment.

The Government have published guidance, with illustrative examples, to clarify the rights and obligations of workers and employers, respectively. Any worker who has concerns about unpaid work trials is strongly encouraged to call ACAS (Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service) on 0300123 1100 for free, impartial and confidential advice. ACAS officers will pass on cases to HMRC for further consideration where appropriate. HMRC officers consider every complaint they receive and will take enforcement action where they consider workers are being exploited under the cover of recruitment. As such, the Government do not currently have any plans to ban unpaid work trials.

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**not later than
Monday 25 January 2021**

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