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HOUSE OF COMMONS
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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Thursday 21 January 2021

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House of Commons

Thursday 21 January 2021

The House met at half-past Nine 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

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Great Britain-Northern Ireland Pet Travel

Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP): If he will take steps to ensure that the new regulations for Great Britain-Northern Ireland pet travel are not overly restrictive. [911159]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): The Northern Ireland protocol under the European Union withdrawal agreement applies the EU pet travel regulations for pet movements from Great Britain to Northern Ireland. Great Britain has currently been listed by the EU in part 2 of the regulations, which requires some documentation. However, Great Britain and Ireland have a similarly very high health status, and we are discussing possible bilateral provisions with Ireland. In the meantime, the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs is taking a pragmatic approach in this initial period.

Claire Hanna [V]**:** I assume that the Secretary of State is aware of the challenges this causes for ordinary pet owners, but specifically can he advise what mitigations were anticipated and are being put in place for those who require assistance dogs to travel between Britain and Northern Ireland?

George Eustice: The primary purpose of the pet travel regulations is to control the spread of rabies, and both Ireland and Great Britain have very similar and very high health status on rabies, having not had it in dogs previously. We therefore think that there should be easement on the provision; we have argued with the Commission that we should be listed in part 1, but we are continuing to make those bilateral negotiations with Ireland a priority.

Buckskin Flood Alleviation Scheme

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Environment Agency on when the Buckskin flood alleviation scheme in Basingstoke will be completed. [911160]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): I understand that the Buckskin flood alleviation scheme became operational on 24 December, Christmas eve, reducing flood risk to 170 homes. Final minor works are now scheduled to be completed by the end of January 2021, and the scheme has been delivered within budget despite the challenges of the coronavirus pandemic.

Mrs Miller [V]**:** That is welcome news, because just a few years ago Buckskin was devastated by floods. My thoughts are with those who were flooded out last night in Greater Manchester, north Wales and Merseyside. No one can stop flooding completely, particularly groundwater flooding, so in addition to this very welcome flood scheme, what assurance can my hon. Friend give that homes affected by floods will still be able to get property insurance?

Rebecca Pow: I thank my right hon. Friend for highlighting that issue. The joint Government and industry Flood Re scheme was designed to help householders at high flood risk to access affordable insurance. Flood Re is available from more than 85 insurance brands now; more than 300,000 properties have benefited since its launch. Before Flood Re just 9% of households who had made flood claims could get quotes from two or more insurers, but in June 2020, 96% of households with prior flood claims could receive quotes from five or more, so I hope my right hon. Friend agrees that that is a hugely improved situation.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab) [V]: Many parts of the country are currently facing severe flood warnings, and our thoughts are with those who have been flooded overnight. We need a proactive rather than a reactive approach to this crisis, so will the Minister today commit to holding an emergency flood summit that brings together agencies and regional leaders to make sure that we have a co-ordinated response to support local communities?

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): We held a flood summit covering the south Yorkshire area shortly before Christmas last year. I have also said that we want to hold a series of roundtable meetings around the country covering individual water catchments.

Distant Fleet Fishing

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): What recent progress has been made on negotiations for distant fleet fishing for 2021. [911161]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): Last Thursday, the UK Government published the determination of fishing opportunities for British fishing boats covering the period to 31 March this year. Licences have been issued for 2,750 tonnes of cod in the waters around Svalbard, which result from arrangements between the UK and Norway. The UK's first annual bilateral negotiations with Norway will also be relevant to distant waters fishing, in particular with regard to Arctic cod.

Emma Hardy [V]**:** Three weeks have passed since the transition ended and still the Hull trawler Kirkella is laid up in its home port unable to sail. The short licence the Secretary of State just mentioned to fish off Svalbard is for a fraction of the previous quota, which means it cannot operate viably, and still fishers' jobs are at risk. We cannot lose Hull's last link with its distant fleet fishing heritage, so I again ask: how much longer will they have to wait for a sensible and viable annual fishing quota for both the Norwegian zone and Svalbard?

George Eustice: It is not unusual for the annual fishing negotiations to go into January. This year, there has obviously been the very special circumstance that the withdrawal agreement came late, but in 2014 access was suspended while negotiations with Norway continued through January. We would anticipate that these negotiations would conclude within the next couple of weeks, and then access to Arctic cod, should that be agreed, could be resumed.

Food Imports and Exports

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): What steps he has taken to prevent disruption to food (a) imports and (b) exports since the end of the transition period. [911162]

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What steps he has taken to prevent disruption to food (a) imports and (b) exports since the end of the transition period. [911181]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): We have engaged extensively with industry to support trader readiness for new requirements for exporting to the EU. For those importing to the UK, we established a phased approach to border controls for the first period of 2021. We have supported exporters as they familiarise themselves with new processes around export health certificates and customs declarations, and we have liaised closely with EU states, such as France, that are also getting used to new processes at the border. Finally, we have worked closely with ministerial colleagues in the Department for Transport to ensure the rapid deployment of the covid-19 testing measures required by France.

Bambos Charalambous: Further to that, may I ask the Secretary of State what measures the Government are taking to prevent more border disruption and costly delays for food and drink exporters when the volumes of trade start to pick up again in the coming weeks? What assessment has he made of the impact on jobs if there are delays and disruption at the border?

George Eustice: The sector that has had greatest difficulty in these first few weeks has been the fishing sector, principally because fish is a very time-critical, perishable product, but there are also some smaller businesses selling smaller consignments in mixed, grouped loads. Overall, the system is working well. We are issuing around 150 export health certificates per day. The volume of lorries through the short straits is back up to around 6,000 to 7,000 per day—still some way short of normal levels, but nevertheless it continues to grow.

Dr Huq: Dina Foods, which produces delicacies in Acton for supermarkets here and all over the EU, rejoiced at the Christmas eve miracle of no tariffs and no quotas, but it is drowning in paperwork for forward freight and it is experiencing crippling additional transportation costs and pallet requirements, and border delays for customs clearance. Goods loaded for Spain on the 8th still have not made it. Buyers are losing patience. The same is happening for those importing from everywhere; what took two weeks now takes three months. Will Ministers fix the rules of origin to stop battering British business?

George Eustice: Colleagues in Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs are looking at the specific issue around rules of origin, which does affect some sectors, but overall, flow at the border through the short straits has been good. More than 6,000 lorries per day are travelling. DFDS, which leads on fisheries distribution, now says that it is getting lorries to Boulogne within 24 hours. Goods are starting to flow, but unavoidably, as we leave both the customs union and the single market, there is of course some additional paperwork.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con) [V]: I congratulate the Secretary of State on the work that he has put into getting the deal to work. We welcome the deal, but there are still lots of problems with people getting things through the border, and delays are reducing the value of fish especially. What compensation can be given to people, and what more can the Secretary of State do to get goods flowing through the borders—both at our end and, in particular, through French ports when there are problems at their customs?

George Eustice: Yesterday, we announced that we would offer one-to-one support for individual enterprises in the fishing sector that are struggling to get used to the new paperwork; that could be from HMRC or the Animal and Plant Health Agency. In addition, we work very closely with customs officials and Border Force officials in France to help improve the understanding at that level. We also announced a £23 million fund yesterday to help those fishing businesses that have struggled in these initial weeks.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab) [V]: I fear the Secretary of State is living in a parallel universe. He must have seen the headlines: "Pig Heads Are Rotting In Rotterdam As Brexit Delays Hit The British Meat Industry". Nick Allen of the British Meat Processors Association understands that these problems are not teething problems; they are structural. He warns that the meat industry's trade with the EU is in jeopardy. Is he right about that? What is the Secretary of State going to do about it—just suggest that farmers do something else?

George Eustice: The hon. Gentleman is wrong about that. Actually, goods are flowing, particularly lamb, which is our principal meat export. Dairy goods are also flowing. Yes, there are occasionally delays at the border, as border officials in France and the Netherlands get used to the new processes, but we are intervening in all such instances to help the businesses concerned.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP) [V]: Europe's biggest fish market in Peterhead is empty. An industry has collapsed because this Government's ideological blinkers meant they made a mess of the negotiations and Ministers think it is a teething problem or a paperwork problem or it is not their fault. Will Ministers tell us how they intend to sort this out? Will the Government go back to the EU to seek a grace period and new negotiations on market access, which many in the sector are asking for, even if that means accepting some regulatory alignment?

George Eustice: No.

Scottish Fishing Communities: EU Trade

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What assessment his Department has made of the effect of the UK-EU trade and co-operation agreement on Scottish fishing communities. [911164]

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): What assessment his Department has made of the effect of the UK-EU trade and co-operation agreement on Scottish fishing communities. [911170]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): The trade and co-operation agreement establishes tariff-free trade on fisheries exports to the EU and also establishes a five-and-a-half-year multiannual agreement on access and sharing arrangements for quota. Under the agreement, there are year-on-year transfers of fishing opportunities from EU fleets to the UK fleet. Overall, the EU relinquished 25% of the quota it had previously been allowed to catch in UK waters. There are gains, both in the North sea and in the west of Scotland.

Stuart C. McDonald [V]**:** Scotland's high-quality seafood producers are warning that they are going out of business. They cannot have their products sitting in lorry parks in Kent waiting for customs clearance. Those products have to reach market fresh. What are the Government doing to change procedures and technology to ensure an entire industry is not destroyed? Will there be ongoing compensation offered to businesses until this is sorted, or was that offer a one-off? If the Minister could offer a slightly fuller response this time, that would be appreciated.

George Eustice: As I explained earlier, we have announced a £23 million fund to help exporters who struggled with the paperwork in the initial weeks. We have also been working daily with the fishing sector to tackle and iron out any particular issues it has encountered. Twice a week we hold long stakeholder calls with all businesses concerned. I have had personal conversations with organisations such as DFDS, which leads on distribution. We have given them all the support we can to help them iron out the teething issues they have been having.

Neil Gray [V]**:** This Government have followed up their sell-out of Scotland's fishing communities with this £23 million insult. The industry is losing more than four times that every day. It is losing customers with it. And this was the one industry, we were told, that would benefit from Brexit. Why will the Government not act now, act quickly, eat some humble pie and re-establish barrier-free rapid access to the European market for this industry, so it can finally supply its customers again?

George Eustice: With the support we have given industry to iron out some of the issues it has been having, the flow of goods is now continuing. DFDS in particular has been very successful at transporting salmon to the European Union. This week, it resumed groupage systems to take smaller consignments. We know there are between 30 to 50 lorries of fish making their way to Boulogne each and every day.

Agricultural Support

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): What steps he is taking to support agriculture as direct payments are phased out. [911166]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Victoria Prentis): The Government made a manifesto commitment to maintain the current annual budget to farmers. In England, we will be offering both transitional and productivity support from this year. Now we have left the EU, Wales, too, can shape its own agricultural policies.

Virginia Crosbie [V]**:** I thank the Minister for her answer. This week is Farmers' Union Wales Farmhouse Breakfast Week. This morning my family tucked into a hearty breakfast of local produce from the butchers at Anglesey Fine Foods in Valley. Farmers in my constituency, such as Gerald Thomas and Brian Bown, grow and rear some of the finest foods in the UK. What discussions has the Minister had with the Welsh Government to ensure they receive the same levels of support as English farmers now that they have left the EU? Does she also agree with me that Welsh farm sausage is the finest addition to any good breakfast?

Mr Speaker: A good challenge for you there, Minister!

Victoria Prentis: Well, a Welsh sausage is hard to beat, and I congratulate the Farmers' Union of Wales on its excellent farmhouse breakfast campaign and my hon. Friend on sourcing and enjoying local produce with her family this morning. DEFRA works closely with the Welsh Government, and we have a shared commitment to promoting Welsh food.

Mr Speaker: Greg Smith, follow that one!

Food Producers: Content Restrictions

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential effect on UK food producers of proposed restrictions on promotions of products high in fat, sugar and salt. [911167]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): Colleagues in the Department for Health and Social Care carried out a consultation on the proposal to restrict the promotion of foods high in fat, salt and sugar in stores. The Government's response to the consultation and the impact assessment were published on 28 December 2020. This concluded that the benefits for the nation's health and the reduction in cost on the NHS outweighed the costs.

Greg Smith: The inclusion of breakfast cereals in the proposals for restricting the promotion of these products is causing real concern to cereal growers in my constituency, such as Morris of Hoggeston, and the wider breakfast cereal industry. particularly as there is no allowance for

the naturally occurring sugars and fats from the dried fruits and nuts often put with cereals such as granola, porridge and muesli. Will my right hon. Friend advise what assessment has been made of the impact on UK farmers of these proposals and work with colleagues, particularly in the Department of Health and Social Care, to see more common sense applied to breakfast cereals?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend raises an important point. Cereals, such as those grown in my hon. Friend's constituency, are an important source of healthy food. Breakfast cereals will be captured by DHSC's policy only if they are classified as high in salt, fat or sugar, and the nutrient profiling model used by Public Health England accounts for the nutritional benefits of cereals, fruits and nuts. I suggest that he raises his concerns with the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), but I would also be willing to engage in that discussion, given the particular concerns that he raised.

Tree Planting

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase tree planting. [911168]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): We committed in our manifesto to increasing planting across the UK to 30,000 hectares, and we are working with the devolved Administrations to deliver that. We announced a £640 million nature for climate fund, a lot of which will contribute towards the tree planting, together with our green recovery challenge fund, and the skills required to plant these trees and look after them will be part and parcel of this. We will be publishing our tree strategy with all the details later in the spring.

Harriett Baldwin: As communities along the River Severn catchment are facing flooding once again, I thank the Minister for all she has done to fund a hardening of flood defences along the River Severn. Will she say how tree planting is also effective at reducing the amount of floodwater that goes through the catchment and reducing the speed?

Rebecca Pow: I thank my hon. Friend very much for that question, and of course our sympathies go to anyone who has been flooded overnight. With the Environment Agency, we have a very big project to oversee all that. We are absolutely committed to better protecting the country from flooding, and I thank her for her comments about what is happening in the Severn valley. Natural flood management, including tree planting, cannot solve the issues of conventional flooding, but it is part and parcel of the whole plan—the holistic plan—for dealing with flooding on a much wider and more comprehensive scale. Proposals to do that include flood-risk management options, which will include tree planting, improve water quality and enhance the environment. It will be an integrated approach and I very much look forward to hearing more about the plans for the Severn valley, which I know she is hugely behind.

Air Pollution: Brownfield Redevelopment

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the level of air pollution generated from the redevelopment of brownfield sites. [911169]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): The Secretary of State regularly meets Cabinet colleagues to discuss a range of issues, including air quality and planning issues. Air quality is a key consideration of local authority planning decisions, and there are strong protections in place to safeguard people from unacceptable risks from air pollution where development is proposed, and this is detailed in national planning policy.

Mr Sharma [V]: People living in my constituency feel choked by the fumes from the remediation of Southall gasworks, a project forced through against the wishes of local residents and local representatives by the then Mayor of London, Boris Johnson. Will the Minister confirm that they will meet me and local residents to explain why they think this is acceptable and why the Government will not empower either the Environment Agency or Public Health England to act?

Rebecca Pow: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. The redevelopment of the former gasworks site at Southall is a matter for the local authority and the Mayor of London, as I am sure he is well aware. Local authorities are required to review and assess local air quality and decide what monitoring is necessary in line with statutory duties. This Government are tackling air quality and taking it extremely seriously with their £3.8 billion project. If the hon. Gentleman wants to contact me with any details about this issue, I am happy to speak to him but I am not able to get involved in any way in particular planning issues.

Food Security and Poverty: Lockdown

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on tackling food poverty and insecurity during the January 2021 covid-19 lockdown. [911171]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): The Government have put in place a winter package to support the economically vulnerable. This includes a £170 million covid-19 winter support grant for local authorities to support households with food and other costs, and £16 million of funding for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to support charities with food redistribution to the vulnerable.

Kate Osamor [V]: Over the last five years, millions of families have experienced food insecurity, causing a 74% increase in food bank usage, yet the Government are refusing once again to extend free school meals over the February half-term, saying that councils have to cover the cost. What assurances can the Secretary of State give that every single child entitled to free school meals, including those with parents with no recourse to public funds restrictions, will receive the meals they need over the half-term?

George Eustice: While we have not extended the free school meals during the half-term period, we have announced a range of other interventions, including the holiday activities scheme that was announced late last year and also the grants that I have just announced that local authorities can use to help those in need.

Animal Welfare

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure the UK is a global leader in animal welfare. [911173]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Victoria Prentis): The Government are committed to the animal welfare agenda. Currently, we are working on proposals to ban live exports for slaughter or fattening, banning primates as pets and introducing compulsory microchipping for cats. We will increase sentences for animal cruelty, enhance the welfare standards of farmed animals and bring forward proposals relating to animal sentience.

Dr Evans [V]: I thank the Minister for her answer, and I am grateful for all she is doing, but both the demand for puppies in the UK and their price have skyrocketed over lockdown. I declare an interest: I bought two of the same breed several months apart and saw a doubling in the price. I have been speaking to reputable breeders, and they are choosing not to breed their dogs because of concerns about welfare. What are the Government doing to ensure puppy welfare, clamp down on puppy farms and stop puppy profiteering?

Victoria Prentis: My hon. Friend raises an important question, which I know he has campaigned on before. Regulations in England require anyone in the business of breeding and selling dogs to be licensed. Last year, we banned commercial third-party sales of puppies and kittens, and also launched our national Petfished campaign to educate the public on how to source pets responsibly.

Puppy Trafficking

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): What steps he is taking to stop recently born puppies being brought into the UK illegally. [911174]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Victoria Prentis): DEFRA takes the trade in puppy smuggling seriously. We operate a rigorous checking regime, and the Animal and Plant Health Agency works collaboratively to share intelligence, disrupt illegal imports and seize animals where that is necessary. The end of the transition period has created new opportunities for cracking down on puppy smuggling, and we are considering a range of options to help with this.

Andrew Gwynne [V]: Every year thousands of puppies are still illegally smuggled across eastern Europe to be mis-sold to British dog lovers. Many suffer significant health problems and behavioural challenges and some do not survive. Dogs Trust wants the Government to raise the minimum age for puppies to enter the UK to six months and to significantly increase penalties for smugglers. The Minister talked about the opportunities of the end of the transition period, so when are we going to get on with it?

Victoria Prentis: The Government are actively considering a range of opportunities to crack down on this abhorrent trade, as the hon. Gentleman says. We are listening to the views of a large number of stakeholders, including Dogs Trust and the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, which have made useful comments in this space. I look forward to working with him and Members from across this House to take these proposals forward.

Topical Questions

[911119] **Alex Davies-Jones** (Pontypridd) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): Over the past 48 hours, Storm Christoph has caused very high rainfall, leading to hundreds of flood warnings, particularly in areas around the north-west and Yorkshire, including in Chorley—your constituency, Mr Speaker. Four severe flood warnings have been issued, two in the Didsbury area of Manchester, and two in the Maghull area of Liverpool. Overnight, those in 200 homes in Maghull and more than 2,000 homes in Didsbury were advised to evacuate. Water levels in the Didsbury flood basin have started to recede, but water will continue to work through the river systems in the north-west and Yorkshire in the coming days. More unsettled weather is expected next week, so we continue to prepare for further impacts.

Alex Davies-Jones [V]**:** The Secretary of State may not be aware that last night's rainfall has caused another landslip on a former coal tip in Rhondda Cynon Taf. The long-term management of these tips is a UK Government responsibility. We all need to do what we can to protect our local environment, and coal tips are a major part of our heritage here in the Welsh valleys. Will he therefore commit to working with his colleagues in the Cabinet to publish a strategy outlining the Government's long-term plan for managing these coal tips?

George Eustice: We have been working closely with both the Secretary of State for Wales and the Welsh Government on this challenge, which we all take seriously. I know that discussions have taken place in the past with the national Coal Authority on this matter as well, and we will continue to work closely with the Welsh Government on it.

[911122] **Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I can visit the Lucombe oak at Kew Gardens, but not the rhinos at Whipsnade, and they are both out in the fresh air. Will the Minister press for the outside areas of zoos to be made available for the public to visit, just as they can go to Kew Gardens, as soon as possible?

George Eustice: We all very much hope to be able to lift the restrictions of lockdown as soon as possible. My hon. Friend will be aware that in the first lockdown, we allowed zoos to open after we allowed parks to open. Zoos are outdoors, but people tend to follow the same routes, so the risk is judged by Public Health England to be higher. However, I have sympathy with the issues zoos face, and we want to get them open as soon as possible.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Each year, 40,000 people die from poor air quality. Labour has tabled an amendment to the Environment Bill, on which there will be a vote on Tuesday, to put the World Health Organisation air

quality standards into law. Can the Secretary of State tell me why his Government plan to vote against that amendment?

George Eustice: We are working on the air quality targets that will form part of our targets under the Environment Bill. We are looking at population exposure, as well as an absolute concentration target, and we are working with experts to assess what that concentration target should be.

Luke Pollard: I do not think that answer was good enough, and it speaks to a larger concern: the Government seem to be rolling back hard-won environmental gains. It will not just be Britain watching the votes on the Environment Bill; it will also be the Biden-Harris Administration. If Labour's amendment is voted down, although it would prevent the Government from allowing bee-killing chemicals, loosening the chemicals regime, and having a weaker environmental watchdog than we had last year, what message does it send about how much we can trust the Prime Minister when he speaks about "building back better"?

George Eustice: We have not changed our regulations on neonicotinoids, if that is what the hon. Gentleman is referring to. In common with 10 other EU countries, we have granted an emergency authorisation, which is an integral part of the precautionary principle. We have done so for a non-flowering crop, and we have also made it clear that flowering crops cannot be grown there for at least three years.

[911123] **Caroline Ansell** (Eastbourne) (Con) [V]: Six years ago, my right hon. Friend visited Sovereign Harbour in my Eastbourne constituency and saw ambitious plans for a whole new quayside development. Despite the challenges of covid, construction is in full swing. When the coast is clear, will he make a return visit to congratulate all those involved—and, importantly, to assure them that there are new opportunities ahead for the under-10 metre fleet, and that historical inequalities in quota will be levelled up?

George Eustice: I remember very well that visit to my hon. Friend's constituency. It is always good to see such ambitious plans come into effect and start to take shape. I would be delighted to visit her constituency again, and to outline some of our plans to ensure better fishing opportunities for our inshore fleet.

[911120] **Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab) [V]: Farmers in Cockerham, Winmarleigh and Pilling have experienced considerable flooding in recent years. The farms consist of grade 2 and grade 3 agricultural land—some of the most productive farmland in Lancashire—which is vital to our local economy. What extra support are the Government prepared to give farmers and the Environment Agency to make sure that such businesses can adequately protect themselves from flooding and continue to produce high-quality, nutritious food?

George Eustice: Floods have impacts on many communities—not only urban communities and households, but farmland, which can lead to the loss of crops. There is some weighting in the floods formula to protect farmland, and we have a number of schemes to help to remedy flood risks on agricultural land when flooding occurs.

[911126] **Mark Eastwood** (Dewsbury) (Con) [V]: Early last year, Storm Ciara forced the banks of the River Calder to burst, causing devastation in the Mirfield part of my constituency. Yesterday, unfortunately, we had a repeat performance in Mirfield when Storm Christoph hit, cutting off businesses and homes. Will my right hon. Friend reassure the people of Mirfield that action is being taken to prevent such destructive flooding events in future?

George Eustice: Late last year, we held a flood summit to discuss some of the particular challenges around the River Calder in my hon. Friend's constituency. There have been a number of important projects around that area, including at Hebden Bridge, where I believe construction is well under way. Further projects are in the pipeline, and we continue to work with the Environment Agency to manage water catchments effectively.

[911128] **Andrew Percy** (Brigg and Goole) (Con) [V]: All that water from the Calder that we just heard about finds its way into my constituency via the River Aire, and we have, yet again, another nervous wait here in the lower catchment as the washlands start to fill and flood alerts and warnings are issued. Will the Secretary of State comment on the adequacy of the flood defence funding rules for communities such as mine, which repeatedly face flooding issues, or flood alerts and warnings?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend's constituency is in a unique area with a unique geography, as he knows, and it does face frequent flooding—it was among the worstaffected when we had the floods last year. We will shortly issue a consultation on changes to the flooding formula, and one thing that we want is for greater weight to be placed on frequently flooded communities.

[911136] **Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD) [V]: I have a constituent who wants to start a lobster hatchery, but they have been shocked by the impact on the fishing sector of our departure from the EU. Should anybody interested in coming into the fishing industry even bother?

George Eustice: Of course they should, because in the white fish sector and the quota sector we have secured an uplift in quota that is front-loaded; the uplift is 15% next year. We will also have full regulatory autonomy on technical conservation measures, which gives us the ability to support the shellfish sector far better than we were able to in the European Union.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

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

Covid-19: Support for Vulnerable People

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): What assessment the Church of England has made of the effectiveness of partnerships between local authorities and faith groups in providing support to vulnerable people during the covid-19 outbreak. [911079]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): I am delighted that Lichfield, Rochester, Blackburn and Salisbury cathedrals are among the church buildings being used as vaccination centres. As well as providing worship, prayer and community support, parishes have been providing food, medicine delivery, bereavement counselling and much more, serving the needs of everyone in their local communities.

Stephen Timms [V]**:** The "Keeping the Faith" report in November showed the remarkable extent to which local councils have turned to churches and other faith groups during the pandemic, especially for help in distributing food, and how positive an experience for councils this has proved to be. Will the Church of England urge Ministers to help these new partnerships with local councils continue beyond the pandemic?

Andrew Selous: Yes indeed, and I warmly commend the all-party parly group on faith and society for its research, as well as the Kruger review. I look forward to Colin Bloom's report, commissioned by the Government, which assesses faith community engagement. I hope it will build on my right hon. Friend's important and very welcome all-party group research.

Persecution of Christians: Nigeria

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): What progress the Church of England has made on its work to help tackle the persecution of Christians in Nigeria. [911082]

Andrew Selous: I begin by very warmly welcoming the appointment of my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) as the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion and belief. She has campaigned both knowledgeably and forensically on these issues for many years.

The Church is deeply concerned about the unravelling of the state security apparatus in Nigeria and the activity of non-state actors, which is politicising and polarising identity in Nigeria.

Janet Daby [V]**:** A recent Open Doors UK event highlighted that Christians are more likely to be tortured and murdered for their faith by Islamic militants in the north of Nigeria than in any other country. Persecution also includes denying Christians food, aid and treatment for covid-19. The UK Government need to place pressure on the Nigerian Government to defend and protect their Christian population. What is the Church of England's involvement in supporting these persecuted Christians, and what relief work is it doing with Nigerian internally displaced people camps?

Andrew Selous: The Archbishop of Canterbury, who knows Nigeria well, is monitoring the recent violence and the kidnapping of 300 schoolboys. He and I have met the family of Leah Sharibu, who was kidnapped by Boko Haram in 2018, and who is still a prisoner, as she refuses to renounce Jesus. Clergy who have spoken out have been threatened by prominent civil society organisations, and the Church continues to stay closely involved.

SPEAKER'S COMMITTEE ON THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION

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

Covid-19: May Elections

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What steps the Committee is taking to ensure the safe conduct of elections planned for May 2021 during the covid-19 outbreak. [911083]

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): What steps the Committee is taking to ensure that elections are able to take place in May 2021. [911101]

Christian Matheson (City of Chester): The commission believes that it is an important democratic principle that elections should proceed as scheduled whenever possible. To ensure that can happen in May, the commission is working closely with electoral administrators, political parties and other campaigners to provide the necessary support and guidance, informed by the latest public health advice. The commission's objective is for voters to be able to participate in the polls, campaigners and parties to be able to put their case to the electorate, and electoral administration staff to be able to run the polling stations and count centres safely and competently.

Mr Carmichael [V]**:** Looking at the electoral procedures to be followed, though, we can all see areas, such as the collection of nomination signatures, where there is potential for unnecessary face-to-face contact. Surely this is a moment when we can look at doing these things differently, but if we are to make any changes in time for May, that work would need to be done now. Can the hon. Gentleman tell me whether that work is being done by the commission?

Christian Matheson: The commission is undertaking work to ensure that the elections can proceed in May in as safe a way as possible, and is working with electoral administrators to achieve that. They will be following public health advice, but at this stage, as the elections are going ahead in May, there is little time to make changes to some of the procedures before those elections.

Wes Streeting [V]: Has the Electoral Commission looked at the possibility of having all-postal ballots, or, failing that, at least providing households with postal vote application forms and a freepost return service, so that anyone who wants to vote in May's elections—as everyone should—is able to do so safely and without any financial barriers?

Christian Matheson: May I take this opportunity to wish my hon. Friend a very happy birthday?

The commission has highlighted that there would be significant practical challenges in delivering an all-postal election in May. In particular, collecting personal identifiers from all eligible electors, which is a key part of important security checks, is not practicable in the time available. The commission considers that, where possible, voters should be able to choose how they wish to cast their vote, including having the option to do so in person. It

will make available all options to proceed as safely as possible for the elections in May. Whether the elections continue in May is a matter for the UK Government and the devolved Administrations.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

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

Lockdown: Church Attendance

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): What additional support has been provided to the clergy and churches to help people attend church in person or online during the January 2021 covid-19 lockdown. [911084]

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): What additional support has been provided to the clergy and churches to help people attend church in person or online during the January 2021 covid-19 lockdown. [911086]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): The Church is grateful to the Government for not imposing another national closure of religious buildings. It is right that parishes take local decisions on what to offer. There were nearly 36 million viewings of the Church's Christmas "Comfort and Joy" series. For those who prefer the telephone, the DailyHope worship line has received 350,000 free calls.

Danny Kruger [V]: It is very encouraging to hear that. It is a matter of deep regret that churches were closed during the lockdowns last year. I very much appreciate the fact that they are allowed to conduct services this time. Obviously we hope that we will all be out of restrictions soon, but there is always a danger of further restrictions. We worry a lot about the provision of online teaching in schools. Does my hon. Friend agree that the delivery of online live church services is enormously important, and—we must be frank—that this is not a skill that might come naturally to many vicars? Does he agree that the Church of England should make an absolute priority the provision of online resources, and the training of vicars and church teams to deliver them?

Andrew Selous: Indeed I do. Over 7,000 people have now attended the Church's digital training, equipping parishes across the country to stream services on a variety of different platforms. My own rector has now been commended for her YouTube skills by eight-year-olds in her benefice.

Alexander Stafford [V]: Many churches in Rother Valley have adapted during these times by holding online services, such as the many wonderful services at the Wales parish church and St Joseph's, Dinnington. However, Rother Valley's churches have lost a great deal of income from the in-person offertory collections and fundraising events, putting church maintenance and repairs at risk, including the much-needed repairs to St Simon and St Jude church in Thurcroft. Does my hon. Friend share my concern regarding the black hole in local churches' budgets and potential delays to repairs, and will he work with churches to ensure that they have what they need to survive?

Andrew Selous: My hon. Friend raises a really important point. I draw his attention to the Parish Giving Scheme, which people can do by direct debit, and to various online giving options. Of course, the commissioners have provided tens of millions of pounds to help churches. I would also say that perhaps people who are not paying for a season ticket might want to pay a little bit more to their local church, given that they have made a saving in that area.

PARLIAMENTARY WORKS SPONSOR BODY

The right hon. Member for East Hampshire, representing the Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body, was asked—

Restoration and Renewal: Disabled Stakeholders

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): What steps are being taken to consult disabled stakeholders on the restoration and renewal project. [911087]

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) [V]: This is a vital issue. The programme is committed to improving accessibility in its detailed work on the outline business case, which will form the scope for the restoration and renewal project. It is engaging regularly on this issue with the House administrations, with representatives of staff with disabilities, and with independent accessibility and inclusion technical experts.

Florence Eshalomi [V]: I thank the right hon. Member for his answer. Our historic Houses of Parliament are rightly an attraction for visitors from all over the world, but they are also a place of work for thousands of employees, including MPs' staff. My assistant, Harry, uses a motorised wheelchair, and I have seen at first hand how he is unable to navigate most of the building on his own, facing difficult doors, steps and other obstacles. Despite the best efforts of the House staff to mitigate these issues over the past seven months, he is still not able to move around the building independently. Will the right hon. Member agree to meet me and Harry to discuss the renovation project, and to ensure that additional views are taken into account to make our Parliament a truly modern workplace for everybody?

Damian Hinds: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this important issue and Harry's case. Of course I will be more than happy to meet both of them. The programme has established an accessibility and inclusion panel that meets monthly, with representation from both Houses' diversity and inclusion teams and from ParliAble, which, as she will know, is the workplace equality network for parliamentary staff with disabilities. The recently established public engagement strategy identifies accessibility topics, and engaging with disabled people is a particular priority. Plans are also being developed to engage more broadly with all staff working in Parliament, including of course those with disabilities. But in the short term, I shall look forward to meeting her and Harry.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

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

Persecution of Christians

Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab): What steps the Anglican communion is taking to tackle the persecution of Christians. [911088]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): The Church speaks up on behalf of all those who are unable to exercise their right to freedom of religion or belief. The Church of England is part of an international consortium that has just received £5.6 million from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to equip parliamentarians and religious leaders in eight countries in Africa and Asia to counter these challenges.

Taiwo Owatemi [V]: From Nigeria to Eritrea and Burkina Faso to India, Christians are facing grave persecution because of their faith. The persecution of Christians, particularly where they are a religious minority, is a matter of growing concern among my constituents, and this has been reflected in the casework I am receiving. What steps is the Anglican Communion taking to tackle the persecution of Christians across the world? Is the hon. Gentleman able to provide me with information on what guidance and support he is offering to churches in the UK in helping those who have fled persecution?

Andrew Selous: As part of the new Foreign Office project, the Church and the other consortium members will be equipping parliamentarians and religious leaders with the technical assistance and other expertise they need to propose solutions in their own countries to these terrible human rights abuses.

Landholdings

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): What steps the Church of England is taking to promote regenerative agriculture on its landholdings. [911089]

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): What steps the Church of England is taking to assess the efficacy on its land of zero-till conservation agriculture in promoting increased soil health, reduced use of carbon, biodiversity gain and carbon sequestration. [911092]

Andrew Selous: The Church Commissioners are undertaking a natural capital assessment to provide a baseline for our carbon outputs and to understand our ecosystem services. This will provide a plan to lower carbon outputs and inform our natural capital strategy. Where possible, our tenancies have clauses relating to good husbandry and the non-removal of topsoil, and with longer-term tenancies, soil analyses are carried out at the beginning and the end of leases to ensure that soil health is maintained to a good standard.

Chris Loder: I thank my hon. Friend for his answer. The Church Commissioners own an estate of about 105,000 acres. What is the Church doing to help its tenant farmers to achieve sustainable farming, especially in the light of the current pressure that farmers face during coronavirus?

Andrew Selous: I thank my hon. Friend for his interest in this important area. Over 60% of our agricultural land is let on secure agricultural tenancies and the remainder on more modern sorts of farm business tenancies. When new tenancies are granted, we encourage sustainable farming practices through our tenancy precedents. We will be reviewing this further in the light of our natural capital assessment results. We want to help our tenants to achieve both sustainable and profitable outcomes.

Jerome Mayhew [V]: The Church Commissioners' ownership of a large amount of land—over 100,000 acres—gives us an opportunity to lead development of conservation agricultural farming techniques, improving soil health, reducing carbon inputs, and developing the evidence base on carbon sequestration. Does my hon. Friend agree that practitioners should approach management of their farming assets in the same way as they approach their other ethical investments?

Andrew Selous: As a leading global ethical investor, we regularly engage with all the businesses in which we are invested to improve best practice. While farming practices and management decisions are mainly taken by our agricultural tenants, we have some who do practice zero tillage, and we strongly encourage sustainable farming practices when new tenancies are granted.

Covid-19: Landholdings

Mark Eastwood (Dewsbury) (Con): What assessment he has made of the financial effect of the covid-19 outbreak on Church of England landholdings. [911090]

Andrew Selous: The Commissioners' property assets are independently valued by third parties on an annual basis. The audited financial results for 2020 will be available later in the year and laid before Parliament once an annual general meeting is able to take place.

Mark Eastwood [V]: The recently appointed Archbishop of York has spoken in the past about the importance of caring for green spaces. In his enthronement sermon, he declared that

"we are at risk of separating ourselves from the planet itself, so obsessed have we become with the dangerous suppositions of our own importance and dominion."

Can my hon. Friend encourage the archbishop to act on his words and impress upon the Church Commissioner landowners the need to have a rethink of their plan for the unjustifiable destruction of unspoilt countryside and farmland at Chidswell in Dewsbury?

Andrew Selous: I know that my hon. Friend works tirelessly for the people of Dewsbury. I and the staff of the Church Commissioners have met him to discuss this issue. Although the planning application is yet to be determined, it is in line with the strategic objectives of the Kirklees development plan. It will not only bring much-needed new homes to his area, but new employment opportunities and new public open space.

Covid-19: Persecution of Christians

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): What steps the Church of England is taking across the worldwide Anglican Communion to tackle the persecution of Christians during the covid-19 pandemic. [911091]

Andrew Selous: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for being one of three Members today to raise this vitally important issue. The Church is grateful for the Government's continuing commitment to implement the Bishop of Truro's recommendations on this issue. In this week of prayer for Christian unity, we need to be especially mindful of persecuted Christians all around the world.

Henry Smith [V]: What discussions has the Church of England had with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to ensure that covid-19 international aid reaches all in need and is not abused by discrimination against Christians, which has appallingly occurred in some countries?

Andrew Selous: Last year, officials from the Church had regular meetings with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office—both Ministers and staff—where concerns were raised that covid-19 was being politicised and that minority communities were indeed being discriminated against. Bishops regularly raise this issue in the other place as well, and I can assure my hon. Friend that the Church will continue to engage with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office as the need arises.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION

The hon. Member for South Norfolk, the Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission, was asked—

Defence Equipment Plan: NAO Report

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): What the planned timescale is for a response by the Government to the NAO report findings on the Ministry of Defence's equipment plan 2020 to 2030, published on 12 January 2021. [911093]

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) [V]: The National Audit Office produced an important report examining the Ministry of Defence's assessment of the affordability of the equipment plan for 2020 to 2030 and the management of equipment expenditure. It is the latest annual update on the financial pressures that the Ministry of Defence faces in developing its military capabilities. The Government will respond to the expected Public Accounts Committee report on the subject after it is published.

Mr Hollobone: In its devastating report, the NAO finds that the equipment plan

"remains unaffordable for the fourth successive year",

that the budget gap is between £7 billion and £17 billion and that the MOD

"continues to make over-optimistic and inconsistent judgements when forecasting costs."

What specific parliamentary scrutiny would my hon. Friend encourage to force the Government to address these very serious issues?

Mr Bacon: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his assiduous following of this issue. He asked me about it in September last year, after the National Audit Office report on Carrier Strike. We now have the new report, "The Equipment Plan 2020-2030", published on 12 January, and I am pleased to tell him that the Public Accounts Committee will be taking evidence on that report on 4 February. I would also be happy to draw his interest in this matter to the attention of the Chair of the PAC, the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier).

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

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

Lockdown: Support for Schools

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): To ask the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners, what support the Church of England is providing to schools during the January 2021 covid-19 lockdown. [911095]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): Diocesan education teams and local churches have focused on supporting the wellbeing of students and staff through the ongoing provision of collective worship, by providing and distributing food for disadvantaged families and, in many cases, by renovating and distributing technology to enable online learning to supplement the Government's provision.

Caroline Ansell [V]: I thank my hon. Friend for his response. Church leaders and congregations in Eastbourne and Willingdon at St Michael and All Angels and St John's Meads have stepped into the digital divide by rallying round and providing laptops and devices for primary school children in their parishes. Will he join me in thanking them for their contribution, which complements the Government's support in this vital area?

Andrew Selous: Of course I will do that. I am delighted to learn of the work of St Michael and All Angels and St John's Meads. It is typical of what the Church is doing across the country to help not just schools but entire communities.

Point of Order

10.31 am

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On Monday, preceding the Division on the Labour party's motion on universal credit, a number of Opposition Members shouted "No", seemingly to trigger a Division, but the Division resulted in zero No votes. I mistakenly believed that the right hon. Member for Tynemouth (Sir Alan Campbell) called "No" and subsequently voted Aye, meaning that his voice and vote would have been at variance, contrary to a settled principle of this House. It has been pointed out to me that this was not the case, and I would like to apologise to the right hon. Member unreservedly for that allegation. I have written to him to express my apology, and I would like to place it on the record of this House.

Sir Alan Campbell (Tynemouth) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his apology, which I, of course, accept. I am also grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for everything that you have done to help sort this matter out.

Mr Speaker: I am also grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. It is right that he should apologise unreservedly, and he has done so. The matter is now closed.

I am now suspending the House for three minutes to enable the necessary arrangements for the next item of business to be made.

10.31 am

Sitting suspended.

Vaccine Roll-out

10.35 am

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con) *(Urgent Question):* To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care if he will make a statement on the covid-19 vaccine roll-out.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock) [V]**:** We are in the midst of one of the toughest periods of this pandemic. Yesterday saw 1,820 deaths, which is the highest toll since the crisis began. As we endure these dark days and the restrictions that we must all follow to save lives, we know that we have a way out, which is our vaccination programme. Thanks to the hard work of so many people, we now have an immense infrastructure in place, which day by day is protecting the most vulnerable and giving hope to us all.

I am glad to report to the House that we have now given more than 5 million doses of the vaccine across the UK to 4.6 million people. We are making good progress towards our goal of offering everyone in priority groups 1 to 4 their first dose by 15 February. That is a huge feat, and one in which we can all take pride. We are vaccinating at a greater daily rate than anywhere in Europe—twice the rate of France, Spain or Germany.

The first 5 million doses are only the beginning. We are opening more sites all the time in cathedrals, food courts, stadiums, conference centres, GP surgeries and many, many other places. Today, a cinema in Aylesbury, a mosque in Birmingham and a cricket club in Manchester have all come on board as part of 65 pharmacy-led sites across England that are joining our vaccination programme this week. That ongoing expansion will help us protect even more of the most vulnerable even quicker. From today, we will also publish more localised, granular data, broken down by NHS sustainability and transformation partnership area, as well as by region, so that the public have the best possible information about all this work.

This virus is a lethal threat to us all. As we respond through this huge endeavour, let us all take comfort in the fact that we are giving 200 vaccinations every minute. In the meantime, everyone must follow the rules to protect the NHS and save lives. We can do that safe in the knowledge that the tide will turn and that, with science, we will prevail.

Huw Merriman: Mr Speaker, thank you very much for granting this urgent question. I also thank the Secretary of State for his update and for all the time and devotion he gives to this matter, and the vaccines Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), who is doing an amazing job. Everyone is doing an amazing job across the country to roll out this vaccine, and I absolutely salute them all. They include my Westminster office manager, Iona Cullen-Stephenson, who has been vaccinating.

In my part of rural East Sussex, the vaccine has been slow to reach rural Rother, Battle and Heathfield residents. In the 200 square miles that I represent, only one surgery has been vaccinating. That has got better from this week, and I welcome that. I thank the Sussex Community NHS Foundation Trust team. Adam Doyle and his team have been amazing to MPs.

[Huw Merriman]

I have three questions to the Secretary of State about rural areas. First, can we draw up a new vaccine contract for GPs that guarantees that they will receive only AstraZeneca, and not Pfizer, which they find difficult to store? Many GPs in my area tell me that they will sign the contract if they can get AstraZeneca only, so it would be just like the pharmacy contract.

Secondly, we will soon have the welcome challenge of delivering the vaccine to priority groups 5 to 9. At the same time, we will have to deliver the second dose to the priority 1 to 4 cohort, who are more vulnerable. Can we ensure that the latter priority groups go to the hubs, because those groups will find it easier to travel, and that we use our local GP surgeries to re-dose priority groups 1 to 4?

Thirdly, I know that the Government rely on the manufacturers for supplies, but can we try to give more forward-looking supply levels to our county teams so that they have indicative estimates to enable them to plan better on the ground?

I welcome the statement from the Government. I would ask that colleagues be given an opportunity every week to question members of the Government. We receive updates from our own community teams, and it is surely right that we should be able to put the same questions and ideas to the Front Benchers.

Mr Speaker: Before I bring in the Secretary of State, I will just say that this is your UQ, rather than the Government coming forward with a statement. We have had to ask for it.

Matt Hancock: On that last point, we typically do come forward with a statement at least once a week, and I am very happy to answer questions at any time.

Mr Speaker: Order. Can I just correct the Secretary of State? We have not had one for over a week.

Matt Hancock: Typically, I have come forward at least once a week, and I am very happy to do that and to respond to questions at any time. I am very glad that the technology is working and I can do that while self-isolating at home, as I am now.

On the substance of the questions asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), the first thing I would say is that I am absolutely delighted that there are new centres opening in Sussex—in Ticehurst village hall this week—so that the roll-out can reach all parts. I will consider the point that he makes about cohorts 5 to 9, which will need the first dose of the vaccine at the same point as we start the second dose for those who have been vaccinated from the start of January. When we restart with the second doses, it will be important to make sure that they are available as close as possible to the largely elderly population who will need them, and I will take away the point that he raises.

The challenge on the contract is tied in with the first and third of my hon. Friend's questions. The challenge is essentially that we have a lumpy supply. The manufacturers are working incredibly hard to deliver the supply as fast as possible, and I pay tribute to them and their work. It is challenging, however, and therefore it is not possible to give certainty as far out as many GPs and those who are delivering on the ground would like. The worst thing would be to give false certainty. We do try to give information about what is coming next week, but until the supply smooths out, as I am sure it will over time, going further out than that would give false certainty. The worst thing would be to have GPs across the country booking in large numbers of people and having to reschedule those appointments unnecessarily.

I will take into account the point that the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine is easier to deliver in rural areas, and the request for some people to be able to do that. At the moment, however, we must use the contract that we have.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): Yesterday I visited the vaccination centre at Leicester racecourse, and it was inspirational to see the joy on the faces of those who were vaccinated and the pride of the staff and volunteers doing the vaccination. The figure of 4.6 million is indeed welcome, and it is a reminder that when the NHS is put in charge and tasked with implementing a large-scale project across our communities, it gets on with it and delivers. The Secretary of State has a target to vaccinate care home residents by the end of the week. Will he update us on progress towards that target?

Today we have had the latest Imperial survey, and the findings are alarming. It is especially concerning that infection rates are so high in London, and yet London and the east of England appear to be behind the rest of the country on vaccine roll-out. Will he tell us what action is being taken to speed up vaccination across London and the east of England? The Imperial survey also highlights the disproportionate infection rates among key workers and those from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds. Once the nine priority groups are vaccinated, is it the Secretary of State's expectation that we will then move to prioritise key workers—teachers, police officers, firefighters, transport workers, supermarket staff—who are more exposed to the virus at the moment?

The Secretary of State will know that there are 11,000 community pharmacists. That could mean up to 30,000 pharmacists at the heart of delivering this vaccine. We should be using them not just because of the volumes of doses they can administer, but because they have years of experience of building trust and vaccine acceptability within hard-to-reach groups and minority ethnic communities. I was speaking to pharmacists this week in Dudley who were telling me this. They also, by the way, raised concerns about the wider supply of the consumables needed to administer the vaccine. Can he guarantee that there will be no delay or shortages in the delivery of this wider kit?

The new variants remind us that we have to go further and faster on vaccination and work harder to break transmission chains. Early analysis suggests the South African B1351 variant brings a reinfection risk that means vaccines may need to be redesigned. Has the Secretary of State got a contingency plan in place?

Finally, yesterday's death numbers were truly horrific. Vaccination has to go hand in hand with measures to suppress this virus. That means further containment measures. Not everybody can work at home comfortably or isolate themselves. The system is still expecting families to go hungry to stop spreading infection. Can I urge the

Secretary of State again to fix sick pay and give people proper financial support so that they can isolate and we can drive infection rates down?

Matt Hancock: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that the NHS is doing a great job, supported by so many people. In particular, I want to thank the volunteers who have stepped forward—tens of thousands of them—and are now working to deliver the vaccination programme alongside NHS staff and, of course, members of our armed forces. In fact, there are several Members of this House who are, as we speak, supporting vaccination in vaccination centres, and some of them are doing vaccinations themselves. I am very grateful to all the volunteers.

The hon. Gentleman raises the question of pharmacies and, absolutely, pharmacies are going to be incredibly important, especially for reaching into those communities that may be otherwise harder to reach. The NHS as a whole is highly respected and trusted in all communities of this country so is well placed to do that, and pharmacy colleagues within the NHS particularly so, because they are often the closest to their communities. As I have set out, we have opened 65 vaccination centres that are pharmacy-led this week, with more to come.

The hon. Gentleman asks about the elderly residents of care homes. I am delighted to say that 63% of residents those or have now received the vaccination. That is a really significant increase over the last week. We are on track to deliver on our goal of vaccinating elderly care home residents by the end of this month, and I hope sooner than that.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman asks about the question of the need—potential need—for vaccine redesign if there is a new variant that is not effectively dealt with by these vaccines. Obviously, we are vigilant on that and keep it under close review. I am glad to say that the early indications are that the new variant is dealt with by the vaccine just as much as the old variant, but of course we are vigilant on the new variants we are seeing overseas. He mentioned the South Africa variant, and there is also a variant of concern that was first identified in Brazil, and of course we are vigilant on those matters, too.

What I would say in summary is that all of these things just support the need for everybody to follow the rules and stay at home. It is critical that everybody does their bit to try to stop the spread of this virus while we get the numbers under control and bring them down, thus protecting the NHS and getting this death toll down, because it is far too high.

Mr Speaker: Let us head to Surrey with the Chair of the Select Committee, Jeremy Hunt.

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con) [V]: Thank you, Mr Speaker. This week the Office for National Statistics said that prevalence rates nearly doubled during the November lockdown, and today's REACT—real-time assessment of community transmission—study says that infections are still rising. Is not the reality that these new strains are massively more dangerous and harder to control than many realise? If we are going to bring down the horrific death rates that we are now seeing, should we not secure our border, with quarantine hotels, end household mixing outside bubbles, and follow Germany in mandating FFP2—filtering face piece—masks in shops and on public transport, to give better protection to wearers?

Matt Hancock: We have looked at the question of personal protective equipment with respect to the new variant, and the clinical advice I have received is that the current guidelines are right and appropriate. On international travel, as my right hon. Friend knows, we brought in significant measures last week to close the travel corridors, and we remain vigilant on what we need to do to guard against new variants coming in from abroad. The new variants do change this question, because it is about ensuring not just that we do not get extra cases coming in from abroad—in which case, if an area of a country has a lower case rate than us, there is no more risk than that of people staying in this country—but that new variants that might not be dealt with as effectively by the vaccine do not arrive and that we stop them coming. That is something on which we have recently taken significant action, and of course we keep it under very close review.

Mr Speaker: We now head to the Scottish National party spokesperson, Martyn Day, who is participating virtually and has one minute.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP) [V]: Thank you, Mr Speaker. With supplies of the Pfizer vaccine expected to be temporarily lower for a few months, and with delivery of the Oxford-AstraZeneca supplies behind target, there are both public and professional concerns. What level of supplies can the Secretary of State guarantee over the coming weeks and months, so that health services can plan appropriately? Given that the UK has procured vaccines on behalf of the four nations, how much of this reduced supply will come to Scotland, and was knowledge of vaccine supply disruption behind the UK Government's insistence on the removal of supply numbers from the Scottish Government's vaccine delivery plan?

Matt Hancock: As I have said many times, the supply of the vaccine is the rate-limiting factor for the roll-out, and we share that supply fairly and equally across the UK. There is a lumpy supply schedule and making this stuff is not easy; it is not just a chemical compound, as I have described many times. Ultimately, this is a UK programme delivered in the devolved nations by the NHS, which is doing brilliantly. A massive teamworking effort is trying to get out as much as possible, as fast as possible, and that teamwork is taking place not only across the four nations of the UK, but with the suppliers to make sure that we get as much supply as we can as quickly as we can.

Mr Speaker: Let us head to the Father of the House in Worthing, Sir Peter Bottomley.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con) [V]: May I add to the good questions asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman)? My question was raised, in effect, by Shelagh Fogarty of LBC in *The Daily Telegraph* today. She wrote about confusion regarding the housebound as well as the homebound. We know that people are going to be vaccinated in mass centres—I had the chance to see one yesterday—and in local hubs and at home, but too

[Sir Peter Bottomley]

often people are sitting at home wondering which it is likely to be. Could the Secretary of State get the partnerships for integrated care—the sustainability and transformation partnerships—to make public how soon they expect to get to most of those who are over 80, especially in semi-rural constituencies?

Matt Hancock: I can answer my hon. Friend's question: we will offer vaccination to everybody in the top four categories—the over-70s, the clinically extremely vulnerable and health and social care workers, including the residents in older people's care homes—by 15 February. I am sure that my hon. Friend, like me and like many of us in this House, gets asked by constituents all the time, "When will the call come for me?" The answer is that we are working through that list and we will reach all those groups with an offer to be vaccinated on or before 15 February.

The exact order within that queue is for a local area to decide, and sometimes people might get invited to two different methods of vaccination, such as at one of the big sites and by their local GP, and for people who are housebound there are roving teams led by the local primary care networks to get out and vaccinate them. So the offer will come, and people should be assured that while, as of today, around two thirds of all over-80s have been vaccinated—which is very, very good progress—that means there is a third still to go, and we will get to everyone and make sure everyone gets that offer to be vaccinated by 15 Feb.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD) [V]: Given the concerning data coming out of Israel regarding the efficacy of the first Pfizer dose, which may be quite a lot lower than first expected, are the Government planning to review their policy of delaying the second Pfizer dose by 12 weeks, and, specifically, will the Secretary of State consider giving healthcare workers, who are being exposed to the highest viral loads, an early second dose so that they get maximum protection, because that is as important as personal protective equipment?

Matt Hancock: I am glad to say that I can reassure the hon. Lady, having looked into the data that underpins the article in *The Guardian* that I think she is referring to, that it supports the data on which we have been basing our decision to move to a 12-week dosing schedule—12 weeks from the first to the second dose. The Government chief scientific adviser was asked about this by the media yesterday and explained clearly why we were able to make that decision, because around 89% efficacy comes from between days 14 and 21 after the first dose. Of course we are looking at this data, and we are in fact measuring the efficacy here at home by matching the data between those who have been vaccinated and those who test positive. We are monitoring that and will publish that data as soon as it is clinically valid. This is an important question, but I am glad to be able to reassure the hon. Lady that the headlines that she read in *The Guardian* are not quite right.

Lia Nici (Great Grimsby) (Con) [V]: The NHS teams across North East Lincolnshire are working hard caring for patients with covid, and are now doing a fantastic job administering the much-welcomed vaccines. Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating them, and does he have plans to introduce a personal vaccination record for travel and other purposes?

Matt Hancock: I am delighted that in the Humber, Coast and Vale NHS area 142,000 people have now been vaccinated, and I am very grateful to my hon. Friend and NHS colleagues and colleagues across the House for that huge effort. I congratulate the local NHS in North East Lincolnshire on the work they are doing in getting these vaccines out. I was also able to talk to some North Lincolnshire colleagues in the NHS who are doing a fantastic job, because they have managed to get to all their care homes, which is absolutely terrific. Lincolnshire is doing a great job with the vaccine roll-out.

On my hon. Friend's specific question about travel and the link to vaccination, it is too early to have a firm view, because we have to see the impact of vaccination on the transmission of the disease. Obviously, when someone is vaccinated, that event goes into their health record, which is held by the NHS; it is recorded so they can demonstrate that they have been vaccinated if need be. However, for the time being, we are being very cautious on travel because of the risk of new variants, especially if there are new variants where the efficacy of the vaccine is lower.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) [V]: I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and his regular updates. Will he outline what discussions he has had with the Ministry of Defence to ensure that hospitals throughout the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland can avail themselves of the highly skilled workforce and the logistical expertise of the armed forces? For those who seem perplexed, will he outline the rationale for making use of this tremendous weapon in the arsenal in the fight against covid in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and in saving lives? Will he also join me in thanking the Northern Ireland Executive for taking this step to save lives, regardless of any perceived political point that others may shamefully make?

Matt Hancock: The armed forces have been incredible in their support for the efforts that we have all had to make nationally to tackle covid. That is also true with the vaccination programme—especially the logistical expertise that the hon. Gentleman refers to. This UK-wide vaccination effort has been supported enormously by the armed forces. I am very grateful to them for the work that they have done, really going the extra mile to help save lives.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con) [V]: I am very worried about domiciliary carers who might be employed privately or via an agency and how they will access the vaccine. It is very probable that their employment status is not known, yet they could be going into several homes per day, helping vulnerable people. Can my right hon. Friend reassure me that these brilliant carers will not be forgotten?

Matt Hancock: Yes, absolutely; that is incredibly important, and we are working to ensure that as many as possible are identified. Category 6 in the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation categorisation specifically identifies as part of the early vaccination effort those

carers who may not be paid carers in a care home but nevertheless care for vulnerable people, because of the incredibly important work that they do.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: I am sure that every MP has families in their local community who have been shielding for almost a year now because they have family members who are clinically extremely vulnerable and, indeed, housebound. The Secretary of State said that everybody who is housebound should get a vaccination by 15 February, but as yet no one seems to have seen any of that start. Will he confirm when the Oxford vaccine will be given to those roving teams that he mentioned, and how many people in this country are housebound and are being identified as such to ensure that they do not miss out on the vaccine?

Matt Hancock: Absolutely, that work is under way. In the hon. Lady's constituency specifically, I am delighted that Michael Franklin chemist is starting its vaccination this week. It, along with the local primary care team, will be able to reach people who may not be able to travel. It is an incredibly important part of the vaccination roll-out to make sure that we take the vaccine to those who are housebound. Michael Franklin will be using the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine, which of course is much easier to transport.

Robert Largan (High Peak) (Con) [V]: So far, there are three vaccination centres up and running in High Peak. I pay tribute to all those who are working so hard to roll out the vaccine locally. However, currently the rate of the roll-out is being limited, not by the number of vaccination sites or trained vaccinators, but by the supply of doses coming from AstraZeneca and Pfizer. Will the Secretary of State outline what steps he and his ministerial colleagues are taking to work with those pharmaceutical companies to help them ensure that the supply of vaccine continues to flow to High Peak as quickly as possible?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the rate-limiting step is the amount of supply. We are working closely with the two companies, which are doing a terrific job. We talk to them all the time, in trying to ensure that any blockages are removed. They are going as fast as they can in producing the vaccine, whether that is the Oxford vaccine, produced here in this country, or the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, produced in Belgium and supplied to us. Everybody is working as fast as we can, and I am delighted that the NHS is champing at the bit for more supply in order to deliver it.

Across Derbyshire there have been more 70,000 vaccinations—70,332, according to the latest data I have, as of 17 January. Derbyshire has vaccinated 65% of its over-80s, which is almost exactly the national average of 67%. Derbyshire is doing a great job; I congratulate those in the NHS in Derbyshire, and thank them for their efforts and their work. There is still a lot further to go, but almost two thirds of Derbyshire's over-80s have been vaccinated. We have to keep at it and keep working hard to make sure that all the vulnerable are protected, and then move on to the rest of us.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab) [V]: After questioning the Prime Minister last week, I am delighted that the first community pharmacies are now taking part in the vaccine roll-out, but just a few hundred of approximately 11,000 community pharmacies just does not seem enough—it is a tiny proportion, leaving vast potential untapped. Will the Secretary of State commit to ensuring that all General Pharmaceutical Council-registered technicians will be allowed to administer vaccines, so that they are available where they are most needed, on every high street, in every community such as mine in east Hull? Witham pharmacy is ready and willing to start vaccinating now—let us get on with it.

Matt Hancock [V]**:** At heart, I agree with the instincts of the hon. Gentleman. The challenge is that we need to do this at scale. As supply is the rate-limiting factor, it is very important that any vaccination site can get enough people through to be able to use the vaccine in time—we do not want to leave stocks in the fridge. Pharmacists are experienced at vaccinating and pharmacy technicians can vaccinate, and they are a very important part of the programme. With pharmacies, we have started with the bigger sites that are able to achieve a higher throughput. It is because supply is the rate-limiting factor that we need to make sure that all supply is used up quickly from the point at which it is distributed. That is why we have taken that approach. I am thrilled that so many pharmacies are now coming on stream; there is lots more to do.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con) [V]: I volunteered in one of the brilliant vaccination hubs in Ashfield and there is one thing that we are not short of: people turning up every single day to get the vaccine. We need more capacity, to win the war quicker and save more lives, so will my right hon. Friend please tell me what he is doing to ensure that the people of Ashfield and Eastwood get their vaccination as soon as possible?

Matt Hancock: I am delighted that my hon. Friend is volunteering in a vaccination centre; that is terrific. This is a big national effort, and he is playing his part. Some 49,000 vaccinations had been done in Nottinghamshire as of 17 January. Clearly we still have to do more, but we are making very significant progress. As I said, the rate-limiting factor is the amount of supply that we get into the country, rather than, for instance, the enthusiasm of GPs in the NHS or, indeed, the number of volunteers who have stepped forward such as my hon. Friend.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab) [V]: A constituent of mine, Mr Clive Tombs, recently reached out to me regarding the crisis facing the London ambulance service. He told me that no one he knows in the service has had a vaccine, despite their being on the frontline of exposure to the virus. At the same time, we have seen pictures of ambulances lined up for hours waiting to get into A&E departments. Clive suggested that, with some co-ordination from the Department, arrangements could be made for ambulance staff to receive vaccines from hospitals while they are waiting in the queue—if there is a surplus and to prevent wastage. Has the Secretary of State considered that possibility? Does he agree that that is a humble suggestion from Clive when, in fact, frontline ambulance staff should be prioritised for the vaccine?

Matt Hancock: Frontline ambulance staff absolutely are and should be prioritised for the vaccine. They are in category 2, and we have to make sure that that happens. I will take away Clive's idea, work on it and get back to the hon. Lady to see what progress we can make.

John Howell (Henley) (Con) [V]: I welcome the opening of vaccination centres across the country, including one imminently at the Kassam stadium in Oxford, but at a meeting that I attended last night of community leaders in Oxfordshire, no one had an idea of when the vaccine centre at Harwell would become operational. Could the Secretary of State oblige?

Matt Hancock: *[Inaudible.]* the date when it will open. There is a huge amount of investment going into Harwell to make sure that we have cutting-edge vaccination manufacturing facilities for the future. The project is being led by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, so I will write to my hon. Friend with all the details.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: I have serious concerns that, after people have had their first and, indeed, second vaccines, they will have a false sense of security about their level of immunity; we know that the efficacy even after two vaccines is not 100%. Will the Secretary of State ensure that it is communicated clearly that people will still need to follow the public health guidance of hands, face and space of at least 2 metres, even after two vaccines and until it is safe to do otherwise?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Lady raises an incredibly important point: someone who has been vaccinated can still catch coronavirus for several weeks. It is really important that people know that. When people are vaccinated, they are told the time that it takes and the limit of the effectiveness, especially in that early period, and they are told very clearly that they still have to follow the rules. That is an important part, especially until we can measure the effectiveness of the vaccination programme on transmission. Only yesterday, I reviewed the communications that go to people when they have been vaccinated, and they are very clear and robust, but it is important that everybody, post-vaccination, continues to follow those rules, both to bring the number of cases down because of the impact on transmission and to protect themselves. The vaccine is the way out, but it does not work immediately, and people still need to be cautious.

Matt Vickers (Stockton South) (Con): From policemen to teachers and shop workers to bus drivers, our key workers have been on the frontline in this pandemic, and we owe them so much. Once the most vulnerable in society have been vaccinated, will my right hon. Friend look to prioritise those who put themselves in harm's way to help others?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend makes a characteristically astute point. The priority, of course, has to be those who are clinically most vulnerable, and after that we will make a decision. I have called for a national debate on who should go next. We will look at the data on transmission and who transmits most, and we will also consider key workers, who are often on the frontline, whether that is teachers, bus drivers or others. That is something that we are actively considering, and I will take his suggestion on board.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab) [V]: The success of any vaccine roll-out relies on reaching every person who needs it. Research presented to SAGE—the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies—worryingly found that just 28% of black, Asian and minority ethnic people intended to be vaccinated compared with 85% of white British people. That is a huge disparity. I asked this question on 11 January but got only a holding answer, so I will ask it again: what is the Secretary of State doing to work with the most vaccine-hesitant and vulnerable groups?

Matt Hancock: It is an incredibly important question. We are doing a huge amount of work on it. It is being led by the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi)—the vaccines roll-out Minister—who I think is sitting on the Front Bench. The need to reach all communities is paramount and that is ongoing now.

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con) [V]: One of the sadnesses of the past year has been the way in which families have been unable to see relatives in care homes, often in the last few months of their lives. I commend the Secretary of State for his focus on vaccinating care home residents. All those families want visits to start again. What message can he give them about how quickly he can unlock care home visits again for those families? Will he also assure care homes that the Government still regard the lateral flow tests, which many want to use to vet potential visitors, as viable, reliable and able to be depended on to allow visits?

Matt Hancock: Yes. That last point is very important and we published extensive analysis that supports that view. On the broader point, we are going to look at the effectiveness in the real world of the vaccine as it is being rolled out and make sure that we look at who has been vaccinated and who is then testing positive in future to see the real-world effectiveness of the vaccine roll-out. Once we can see that effectiveness in the real world, we will then be able to consider all the different restrictions that are in place. Visiting care homes is obviously one of the restrictions that we had to bring in, but I entirely understand its consequences and the impact that it has on the lives of some of the most vulnerable people in society.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP) [V]: The UK has acquired the rights to vaccinate more than the entire population multiple times over, as have many other developed nations. Will the Secretary of State tell us what steps the UK Government are taking to make sure that surplus doses of the vaccine are shared with less developed countries around the world, and will he encourage other countries to do likewise?

Matt Hancock: We have put more money into the international effort to ensure that everybody around the world can be vaccinated than any other country. That is not just more as a proportion of our GDP; it is more cash that has gone into these international efforts across the UK. We can do that because of the strength of our international commitment as a country, so I am very pleased that we have been able to do that. Turning that money into vaccinations is important and a huge amount of work is being done by COVAX to make that happen. The UK can be proud of the work that we have done to support access for the most vulnerable, both in terms of the cash that we have put in and because it is UK

research, backed by the UK Government, that has led to the Oxford vaccine, which is one of the two most appropriate for use in the developing world.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): There has been some great vaccine stuff happening in North West Durham, with 98% of the care homes done and the housebound having been started from last week. I thank the people working in the Crook and Tanfield View vaccine centres locally. I have heard that the pharmacy down in Bishop Auckland that is helping some of my constituents has just got the vaccine. However, I have a big rural area, with some people more than 10 miles from a vaccine centre, so will the Secretary of State let us know when those small hubs are going to be started and when the smaller community pharmacies in my constituency will get the vaccine to help to ensure that everybody across the country gets it as quickly as possible?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is quite right to praise the teams across the north-east who have been doing an unbelievable job. The vaccination of 98% of residents in his area is something we should all celebrate. Making sure that everybody is within 10 miles of a vaccination centre is important. In the very rural areas that may include being 10 miles from a mobile site, because we will send in mobile sites to the most rural areas. Crucially, by 15 February everybody will have the offer of a vaccine. Sometimes they may get two offers. One might be to travel, for instance to go to Newcastle where there is a vaccination centre, but if they get that invitation they can still wait to have the more local offer of a jab from their primary care network. There are different ways to make it happen, but he is absolutely right on the importance of getting the vaccine available for all.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Without increasing the 2 million doses a week to 5 million, we are going to be administering the vaccine to the adult population until the end of the year. That causes great anxiety. People are confused and unclear about if and when they will get a dose, particularly informal carers who worry that they are not on anyone's list. Will the Secretary of State consider requiring doctors and the NHS to text or write to all patients to outline where they are on the list, so that people have a better reasonable expectation of when they will be vaccinated? That would enable them to ensure their prioritisation is correct, and, actually, stop them phoning up surgeries and blocking phone lines to ask questions about when they are going to get their vaccine.

Matt Hancock: All those who are over 70 or clinically extremely vulnerable will have that offer before 15 February. What that means in practice is that if you receive a letter when measures are put in place recommending that you shield—that letter comes from either me or the Communities Secretary—then you are on the list to be vaccinated before 15 February. After that, we will continue through the JCVI cohorts, which of course includes, in cohort six, those who are vulnerable but not in the clinically extremely vulnerable group. We will get there, and we will invite people according to their clinical need. My recommendation to the hon. Gentleman's constituents is that they should wait for the NHS to get in contact with them. We have a programme to make sure that everybody is reached.

Edward Timpson (Eddisbury) (Con) [V]: I join my right hon. Friend in praising the vaccinators, pharmacists, armed forces, NHS staff, support staff and volunteers right across the country, including in my constituency, for the considerable contribution they have already made to the national vaccine roll-out effort. To continue that acceleration, what action is he taking to ensure that all elderly residents in the first priority groups are aware that if they have not done so already, they can get their jab administered locally in the next few weeks through contact from their own GP practice?

Matt Hancock: We have been in contact with all those who have been invited to come forward so far. As for those who have not been yet invited to come forward and are in the top four groups, we will be in contact before 15 February. May I just add that my hon. Friend himself has been volunteering in his local vaccination centre, doing his part on the frontline? I think we should all thank him for that.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab) [V]: I am very pleased that my mother, my aunt and my uncle are all having their vaccinations today, so it seems that the roll-out to the over-70s is going well in Bedfordshire at least. May I ask about young carers? We know that the 10 to 19-year-old group is at particular risk of transmitting covid, if not at risk of suffering badly from it. Many of them will be looking after people who are in the clinically vulnerable group, but at the moment it seems that they will not be prioritised for vaccination, just the people who have more professional caring responsibilities. Will the Secretary of State add young carers to his list of people who, for the sake of the people they care for, will be vaccinated early?

Matt Hancock: I will absolutely look into that. I join the hon. Lady in praising the roll-out in Bedfordshire, which is going well. It is wonderful to hear the personal stories of so many people whose vulnerable family members have been vaccinated. The vaccination programme is touching us all; we just have to get it done as quickly as possible to make people as safe as possible as fast as we possibly can.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Coronavirus deaths are 10% higher in areas with only slightly higher air pollution. Will the Secretary of State bear that in mind in respect of his priorities for the rolling out of the vaccine? More importantly, will he ensure that the World Health Organisation air quality limits are introduced to the Environment Bill next week, so that they have immediate effect and are legally binding? That will save thousands of lives from coronavirus and prevent tens of thousands of premature deaths from air pollution next year, given that as many people die from pollution every year as died from coronavirus last year.

Matt Hancock: The hon. Gentleman is an irrepressible campaigner on tackling air pollution. There is a link between air pollution and a person's risk of dying from covid, and I have been talking about that to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Gordon Henderson (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con) [V]: A large number of people in Sittingbourne and Sheppey who are over the age of 80 have not yet received their covid vaccinations—not because of a lack of will but because of a lack of vaccine. Let me give an example: on the Isle of Sheppey, which has a population of 40,000, local GPs need to vaccinate more than 1,000 people each week to reach the Government's target of vaccinating every person in the first four priority groups by February. Last week, the Sheppey primary care network was promised 400 doses, but eventually received only 300. This week, it has been promised 1,200 doses, but local GPs worry that this quantity will be cut, too. I appreciate that my right hon. Friend is constrained by the number of doses delivered by the suppliers, but what can he do to ensure that both my local primary care networks in Sittingbourne and Sheppey receive the quantity that they need to meet the Government's target?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend asks an astute question which, in a way, demonstrates the challenge we have. There is a demand for more early information about when vaccine will arrive but, because of the lumpy supply, if we give too much prior notice, we sometimes have to make adjustments like the one my hon. Friend described. The good news is that we are on track to deliver the quadrupling of the amount of vaccine to the Isle of Sheppey. Like him, I very much hope that the full 1,200 doses will come.

We are sending more doses to the areas that have made the least progress so far, to make sure that by 15 February we get that offer to everybody equally, irrespective of where they live, across England for the English NHS and, indeed, we are working with the devolved Administrations to make sure that that offer is delivered fairly right across the UK. There is prioritisation of the areas that have made least progress so far, and I am working with NHS colleagues to make sure that that is done as fairly and effectively as possible.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP) [V]: I thank the Secretary of State for the support being given to the people of Northern Ireland. I know he will join me in thanking our frontline healthcare workers who are delivering the vaccine in our communities.

The Secretary of State will know that the key to maximising the uptake of a vaccine is the assurance of its efficacy, but also that if people take part, it will enable life to return to normal—it will enable schools and business to reopen and family life, particularly for elderly relatives either at home or in care homes, to be restored. The public need that hope, yet while we hear much positivity, we also hear of long-term restrictions of many aspects of what was, and should again be, normal life. Can the Health Secretary give an assurance that he will provide leadership on the public messaging and its tone, and set out a route map for the return of the liberty and freedoms that we once enjoyed, and want to enjoy again?

Matt Hancock: Absolutely. We all want to enjoy those liberties again, and we want to do so safely. Balancing those two things is at the core of the conundrums of policy, and has been throughout this pandemic. The critical thing is to make sure we get this vaccine rolled out as fast as possible. That is at the centre of the route out, throughout these islands and, indeed, across the world. I understand the yearning for a clearer map out, but until we know the impact of the vaccine on transmission, it is hard to put timescales on that.

We have to watch the data. Of course I want to see the number of cases come down, but the reason why that matters so much is that we want to see the number of hospitalisations come down. We want fewer people to die each day from this dreadful disease. The numbers published yesterday—more than 1,800 people died—were truly terrible, and we need to make sure we protect life.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con) [V]: Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating Anthony McKeever and his team on ensuring that people in Southend are vaccinated? Will he reassure me that Southend will receive its fair share of vaccines, that the four most vulnerable groups will all be vaccinated by the middle of February, and that people in their 80s and 90s will not be asked to travel long distances to a hub in Wickford?

Matt Hancock: Yes, that is our goal. All those things are what we are aiming for. I am really grateful for my hon. Friend's support. Eighty thousand people have now been vaccinated in his area of Mid and South Essex. We have made a whole load of progress, but there is much more to do to make sure the vaccine is fairly there for everyone.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD) [V]: The flooding over the past few days has already displaced thousands from their homes, and threatens many more over the coming days. For those who are elderly or vulnerable, wondering how they are going to receive the coronavirus vaccine is an added worry that they do not need, especially if they have to move to other regions to stay with family or into temporary accommodation, which the Secretary of State knows can sometimes be for months. Can he tell us whether the Government have a plan for vaccinating people displaced due to flooding?

Matt Hancock: Yes, of course. Flooding brings additional challenges, but we will overcome them.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con) [V]: The vaccination roll-out programme is a huge national success—well done! I thank everyone involved nationally and locally. However, my inbox is overflowing with messages from elderly residents desperately worried that, despite being over 80, 90 and even 100, they have still heard nothing from their GP. Given that other parts of the UK are currently vaccinating those who are significantly younger, what reassurance can my right hon. Friend give to my North Devon constituents?

Matt Hancock: The reassurance I can give to my hon. Friend and, more importantly, everybody living in North Devon, is that we will get there. We set the goal of 15 February for everybody in the four most vulnerable groups—the over-70s and others—to be vaccinated. They will have an offer of the vaccination arrive so that they can be vaccinated before 15 February. The reason we set that date is to make sure that everybody across the country gets it in a fair time. That is why we are putting more vaccine into the areas that have not made as much progress yet. However, across Devon, just under 100,000 people had been vaccinated by the 17th—

a few days ago. By now, I am sure that more than 100,000 people have been vaccinated in Devon. That shows that the roll-out is happening, and we are absolutely determined to reach all parts.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): May I join my parliamentary neighbour, the hon. Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden), in thanking those working in primary care to roll out the vaccine in County Durham? They tell me that if they get the vaccine, they can get it out to those who need it. Last week, though, the primary care trust vaccine hub in Chester-le-Street had to be put on stand-by because there was no vaccine arrival. Today the Secretary of State has again announced new vaccine sites, and suggested that over-70s are going to get the vaccine. In my constituency, people over 80 are still waiting. Can I plead with the Secretary of State to stop the hype and spin, to just be honest with people and with primary care if there is a problem with supply, and to ensure that primary care has enough notice to be able to organise this process, because it is causing a huge deal of pressure on an already overworked system?

Matt Hancock: I am delighted to say that primary care—the GP surgeries across the country—is rising to the challenge brilliantly, especially in County Durham, which is doing an absolutely magnificent job. It is far ahead of the national averages in terms of the roll-out and is doing brilliantly. Of course there are challenges; as the supply comes in, we are getting it to the frontline as fast as we can, and that does mean some rapid turnaround times. I urge the right hon. Gentleman to cheer up and back his local team. Yes, it is difficult, but I know that we will get there.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con) [V]: My right hon. Friend is engaged in a Herculean task, and I think we all appreciate the work that he is doing. I know that he is aware of what he described as the "lumpy" delivery of vaccines, particularly in east Kent. The vaccines Minister—the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi)—is sitting on the Front Bench, and I hope that he is addressing that issue as we speak.

Let me turn to two further matters. Would my right hon. Friend consider ensuring that all hospitals be allowed to have supplies to vaccinate their employees, because at the moment national health service employees working in hospitals are still having to travel far too far to get vaccinated? And when the priority groups have been addressed, will my right hon. Friend give particular attention to the needs of teachers, so that they can get back to work, and to the police constabulary, who are exposed every day of their working lives?

Matt Hancock: My right hon. Friend is quite right to raise the issue of getting supply out to East Kent. In fact, we are opening more centres just outside his patch, in Folkestone, next week. We are putting more vaccination into east Kent, and putting the support there to ensure that the vaccination roll-out can happen. I am glad to say that the majority of over-80s have now been vaccinated, but there is clearly still a lot of work to do. He is absolutely right to highlight the case that both teachers and police officers are understandably making—that, after we have got through the priority groups according to clinical need, we should consider their case for early vaccination.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab) [V]: On Tuesday, the Education Committee heard from the deputy chief medical officer that schools were as safe for pupils and staff as anywhere else, but it now seems that this assertion was based on Office for National Statistics ad hoc survey data that appears to be three months out of date. The assertion about safety in schools was repeated by the Secretary of State on TV this morning. However, more evidence—from the Department for Education itself—shows that infection rates among school staff, teachers and support staff were significantly higher than among the working population as a whole in December. If the Government are determined to reopen schools—we all want that to be a major priority—surely school staff should be ramped up the vaccination priority list, on the basis of this evidence?

Matt Hancock: We are very much open to the vaccination of teachers, and school staff more broadly, whom the hon. Gentleman mentioned, once we have got through those who are clinically most vulnerable. The vaccine programme has to be used to save lives, first and foremost; I think everybody agrees with that. Of course we look at all available data and information in forming that view.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con) [V]: I welcome the opening today of the Weatherley Centre in Biggleswade, which fills a gap in delivery across Bedfordshire, but I wish to raise with the Minister another question that has arisen in Biggleswade and get some policy advice from him. Penrose Court, a residential care home in Biggleswade, has recorded positive cases among residents. The home was advised that there would therefore be a delay in the vaccinations. Today, I understand from the clinical commissioning group that those vaccinations are back on track, but can the Minister advise the House what the policy is on vaccination of residents in care homes where a recent positive case has been recorded?

Matt Hancock: That is a really important question. For the most part, even when there is an outbreak, a care home can offer vaccinations with its local primary care network to those residents who do not have covid. Of course, when this is done, very scrupulous infection control needs to be in place. For instance, many care homes have vaccinated in a garden hub to make sure that the vaccination is outside, which is, of course, so much safer if there is an ongoing outbreak. Sometimes, an outbreak in a care home is so significant that it has to wait, and that has happened in a couple of cases, but all these decisions should be based on the local clinical advice of the GPs who are in the lead on the roll-out of the vaccination to care homes. I am really glad that this situation has been resolved in Biggleswade, and, of course, I am delighted at the new pharmacy-led vaccination centre in Biggleswade, which, as my hon. Friend said, is plugging a gap. He will have heard colleagues across the House praising the roll-out of the vaccinations in Bedfordshire.

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: I thank the local NHS staff in my constituency for their hard work to vaccinate people. In the spirit of working

[James Murray]

together with them, I raised my concerns about the lack of vaccination sites, particularly around Greenford and Northolt in the northern part of my borough, and they agreed with my suggestion that we ask Boots to consider opening a community pharmacy site at their Greenford Westway retail park store. I raised this plan with Boots, who were positive and helpful, and now we need support from NHS England. Will the Health Secretary please ask NHS England to look urgently at lending its support for this plan, so that we can move forward without delay?

Matt Hancock: Let us see what we can do.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con) [V]: I know that the Secretary of State will want to join me in praising the response of GPs, NHS and care staff and volunteers in Warrington, who, working at the two community hubs in the town, will have vaccinated, by the end of tomorrow, around 17,000 people from this area. Looking forward, can he tell the House what plans he has to open 24-hour vaccination centres in the north-west, so that anyone who, say, works shifts or has caring responsibilities can access a vaccination at a time when they might be available?

Matt Hancock: Absolutely. We will pilot that approach and see how much demand there is for overnight vaccination. As my hon. Friend says, it could be particularly appropriate for shift workers, and of course the NHS runs shifts in every hospital because of the need to care for patients overnight, so that is a very important point that he raises. Let me also say how glad I am that we have been able to open the Imaan pharmacy in Bewsey in Warrington, further expanding the vaccine roll-out in his area.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab) [V]: I commend everybody involved in the vaccine roll-out programme, as they have ensured that all care home residents in Slough have received their first dose. I also thank the Health and Social Care Secretary and his team for agreeing to site one of the mass-vaccination centres in my Slough constituency, which has been particularly hard-hit by the pandemic. Can the Secretary of State advise when detailed data will be published on the vaccine roll-out, so that local public health teams and others can identify issues, and will that data be by age, ethnicity, region and level of deprivation?

Matt Hancock: This afternoon, we will be publishing much more detailed local information, so that will be available, and as the roll-out continues, we will publish more and more granular information. The hon. Member is quite right about Slough—it has had a tough time in this pandemic—but it will get the vaccination centre, which is great. It was a real pleasure earlier in the week to have a Zoom with members of the Slough NHS team who have delivered this, with every single resident of a care home in Slough being vaccinated and getting their first jab. It is an absolutely terrific performance by the team in Slough, and I am glad that he is as proud of them as I am. They are a model that all can look to.

Mr Speaker: Order. Can I just say to the Secretary of State that I am about to hand over to the Deputy Speaker?

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con) [V]: First, can I praise and thank all the NHS staff in Dorset, who are doing a wonderful job fighting this pandemic? Secondly, we hear from some scientists that they want the country locked down until June, when 70% of the population will have been inoculated, and according to Sir Patrick Vallance, vaccines are not going to do all the "heavy lifting", but what are we vaccinating for if we cannot begin to reopen our devastated economy and regain our freedoms? Does my right hon. Friend agree that this is about risk mitigation, not elimination, and that a path out of this lockdown is a decision for politicians, not scientists and modellers?

Matt Hancock: The decisions that we take are decisions, rightly, for politicians, guided by the best possible science. The challenge is how to get back the freedoms my hon. Friend rightly refers to as quickly and as safely as possible. The safety element of that is paramount, as is the speed. The one thing that will help on both is to roll out the vaccines as quickly as possible and to monitor their roll-out very closely so that we can see the effect of the vaccine on transmission. As we see more and more information about that, we will be able to make clearer judgments about the release and when we are able to lift some of these restrictions under which we are all having to live.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab) [V]: Clear and timely communications are vital in maximising the take-up of the vaccine. Where people have not responded to an invitation letter, I understand that they will receive a phone call and that phone calls will also be used to ensure that all appointment slots are used. Can the Secretary of State assure me that calls will be accompanied by SMS text messages to ensure that deaf people and those with a hearing loss are not left behind?

Matt Hancock: Wherever possible is the answer. The truth is that the NHS has not in the past collected people's mobile numbers routinely or their email addresses, which is why this roll-out is primarily being done through invitations by letter. I hope that, actually as part of this roll-out, one of the things we will be able to do is make sure that the NHS can put people's email addresses and mobile numbers on their clinical record, where people consent to that of course, because we have seen in other countries such as Israel that where a very large proportion of people have given their mobile number and their email to the health system, we can get in contact with people much more quickly. Having said all of that, some people will never have a mobile phone and some people will never have email, and this is a universal service—of course it is—so letters and texts to those who have poor sight, and ultimately phone calls, including on landlines, or teams going round to people's doors, are all important to make sure that everybody gets access to the vaccine and can receive the invitation.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Before I call James Daly, I just want to say that I want to try to get everybody in, so we probably need to speed up a little bit.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con) [V]: Will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking Bury Council, our local CCG, NHS staff, medical practitioners and all

those involved in the vaccine roll-out in Bury, Ramsbottom and Tottington? Approximately 19,000 vaccinations will have been given by the end of this week across the borough of Bury, and we are confident that all frontline workers and care home residents will be offered the vaccine by Sunday. It has been and continues to be a magnificent effort.

Matt Hancock: That is absolutely fantastic to hear. Across Greater Manchester as a whole, 187,947 vaccines have been done. It has been a huge effort, and I am very grateful for my hon. Friend's support.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Frustrations with the Welsh Government's roll-out programme are well documented, and health boards in Wales have this week had to contend with some supply issues. Can the Secretary of State reassure me that any supply issues are being addressed? Given that Wales has the largest proportion of people aged over 70 in the UK at over 17%, can he give us some reassurance that Wales will receive a vaccine allocation that reflects the level of relative need?

Matt Hancock: All the three devolved nations are getting their vaccine according to fair shares and at the same speed as England. While supply is the rate-limiting factor across the board, the same supply is going in the right proportions across all four nations.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con) [V]: Yesterday I visited the vaccination hubs at the civic centre in Folkestone and at Lydd airport, which along with the Oaklands surgery in Hythe are doing a great job in vaccinating the local community. Does my right hon. Friend agree that in Kent we also need to see the mass vaccination centres opening as soon as possible, which can process tens of thousands of people a week?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I agree with my hon. Friend, and I am delighted to say that next week a new vaccination centre will open in Folkestone, serving the people not only of Folkestone, but of the wider area across parts of east Kent. That is in addition, of course, to the brilliant work that GPs are doing in his part of the world.

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab) [V]: Wakefield CCG decided not to provide information to local residents about the vaccination roll-out here. It said it feared it would lead to awkward questions from a sceptical public about differential treatment—a kind of postcode lottery for key workers, the elderly and the chronically sick. Can the Secretary of State confirm the comments he has made today, which I welcome, about the release of more granular data? However, they are to be provided by huge and remote sustainability and transformation partnerships, so will we know what is happening at the local level to maintain local public confidence? Finally, will he comment on reports in the *Health Service Journal* today that next week, the amount of vaccine will be cut by half in Yorkshire and the Humber?

Matt Hancock: I am delighted that across West Yorkshire and Harrogate as a whole, more than 150,000 vaccines have now been done. I would say to anybody that coming forward for a vaccination when invited by the NHS is the right thing to do. I am delighted to say that far from bring sceptical, the public are hugely enthusiastic about this vaccine programme, and we have seen that the public attitude and enthusiasm to be vaccinated has shot up since we started vaccinating on 8 December. People can see with their own eyes the positive impact that it is making.

We have to ensure that the vaccination programme is fair right across the UK. Some parts of the country, including parts of the north-east and Yorkshire, have gone really fast early on, which is terrific, but we have to make sure that the vaccination programme is fair everywhere, so that everyone in the top four groups can receive that offer of a vaccine by 15 February. We will deliver on that.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Can the Secretary of State speed up the delivery of vaccines to London, so that we can catch up with other areas? Will he also emphasise that while the vaccine gives us all hope for the future—hope that restrictions can start to be lifted—until that point we have to be cautious and stick to the rules, because the virus is lethal and is putting immense pressure on our hospitals, and sadly we are not out of the woods yet?

Matt Hancock: I agree with every word that my right hon. Friend said. I am really pleased that this week Brand Russell pharmacy in East Barnet is opening for vaccinations, and we are accelerating the amount of vaccinations in London, which is the region in England that has the most to do.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP) [V]: I fully appreciate and respect the facat that the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation has a very strict protocol for the roll-out of vaccines, but have it and the Secretary of State considered the notion that staff working to develop and produce vaccines, like those at Valneva in my constituency, should get a vaccination as soon as possible? Will he give some consideration to this and discuss it with the JCVI? I will be writing to him shortly.

Matt Hancock: I will consider that request given the importance of the vaccine supply, which is critical for everybody else to get their vaccinations too.

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con) [V]: This morning Maidstone Hospital rather wonderfully did its 10,000th vaccination. Medway Maritime Hospital has done 5,000, Malling and Blackthorn primary care networks have pretty much completed the first priority groups, and Lordswood PCN, which is only two weeks old, is motoring along to deliver the vaccine to vulnerable groups in Chatham. This is all down the incredible work of all those involved, and I am sure the Secretary of State will join me in paying tribute to them. However, the one piece of feedback I repeatedly get across my constituency is the lack of consistency in supply, so will he reassure me that those who are delivering on target will not be penalised by their own success and that they will get the stock they need to continue to vaccinate priority groups on the list?

Matt Hancock: Yes, of course, we have to make sure that the priority groups are all offered the vaccine everywhere in the country and are able to be vaccinated by 15 February. I totally agree with my hon. Friend

[Matt Hancock]

about the great effort locally. Reaching 10,000 vaccinations is superb. I particularly want to thank Ritchie Chalmers, Cheryl Lee, John Weeks and the whole team at Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS Trust. There have been very significant challenges in Kent over the past few months. Thankfully, the case rate appears to be coming down in Kent, which is very reassuring. We have to get this vaccine out as quickly as possible.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD) [V]: In St Albans, our GP-led vaccination centre at Batchwood Hall is doing a brilliant job, but it only has enough vaccine supply for two days a week, not seven. Now we are hearing rumours that the NHS might set up a large hub in St Albans, which we would not need if our Batchwood Hall centre was getting the vaccines that it needs. Can the Secretary of State confirm that the NHS will be putting all its efforts into helping to put the infrastructure in place in parts of the country that need to catch up, rather than dislocating infrastructure in areas that already have excellent centres but just need that extra vaccine?

Matt Hancock: The truth is that supply is the great limiting factor, so we do need to put the vaccination centres where they are most needed, and pharmacy has an important role right across the country. The hon. Lady is right that the great inhibiting factor is the amount of supply, and that is what we are constantly calibrating to get people as much supply, with as much notice, as we can, given the challenges that we all face.

Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con) [V]: I applaud my right hon. Friend and his colleagues across the NHS, especially here in Shropshire, for the massive effort by so many people to get this vaccination into those in the highest priority groups so quickly. However, there are still some parts of the country where only care homes and NHS frontline staff have been vaccinated, and in the South West Shropshire primary care network, no one in the community over 80 has yet received the vaccine, and none are expected to until late next week. May I ask my right hon. Friend, echoing the pleas made by a number of colleagues, to look at prioritising deliveries for those areas where the highest-priority groups have yet to receive the vaccinations that they are being led to believe are now widely available?

Matt Hancock: Across Shropshire, and Telford and the Wrekin, 14,000 doses have been delivered to the over-80s. I will look into the specific question of the primary care network that my right hon. Friend raises, because I was not aware of that fact. Clearly, Shropshire is vaccinating the over-80s but I will look into that specific. It is true that, right across the country, the catch-up is absolutely vital in areas if they are behind, because it is right that this is done fairly across the country. I will get back to my right hon. Friend with the details of the individual case that he raises.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab) [V]: Is it true, as has been reported, that up to a fifth of staff in some care homes have refused the vaccine? If so, does the Secretary of State have data on this and a plan to address it?

Matt Hancock: We are aware that there are some care homes in which the take-up by staff is not universal—not 100%—although I do not quite recognise the specific figure that the hon. Gentleman gave. I am glad to say that in some parts of the country where a team have gone into a care home and not all the staff have taken the vaccine, when they have returned a couple of weeks later they have been able to complete the roll-out to staff because the staff have been reassured, having seen the roll-out to their colleagues and residents, that it is okay to get the vaccine. The good news is that, overall, take-up and enthusiasm for take-up are very high. We have been hearing today of some cases where there has been a 100% take-up among residents of care homes, and I am really pleased about that. I am particularly pleased that the overall enthusiasm to get the vaccine among the population as a whole has risen quite substantially over the last six weeks. We have worked very hard on this. It is an incredibly important issue and we absolutely have a plan in place to address it.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab) [V]: Can the Secretary of State confirm that people living with a terminal cancer diagnosis are to be included in the vulnerable groups for vaccination?

Matt Hancock: The vulnerable groups are set out clinically. Those who are clinically extremely vulnerable include those to whom we have written, in some cases regularly, during the pandemic. That is a clinical decision, and I think it is right that it should be a clinical decision.

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con) [V]: The vaccine roll-out in Peterborough is going well. Sites are open at the City Hospital and at a number of GP surgeries and medical centres across the city. I want to place on record my thanks to everyone working in these centres across Peterborough, but I still feel Peterborough needs a mass vaccination centre in our city centre. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that there are plans for a mass vaccination centre in Peterborough that will serve many thousands of people in my city?

Matt Hancock: Yes, we are going to have a mass vaccination centre in Peterborough, alongside all the work that the GPs are doing, and we hope that it will be open next week. I want to thank the NHS in Peterborough for the work that it is doing and for getting this going.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: I praise again the work of Cardiff and Vale University health board for its vaccine roll-out. Yesterday it delivered 10 times as many vaccines in one day as it did on its first day of delivery of the programme; it is doing an incredible job. The Secretary of State rightly said that supply was the limiting factor, and this morning we heard that the Wockhardt factory in north Wales had been affected by flooding. Can he confirm whether any supplies have been damaged or affected? We have also heard that the Serum Institute of India factory has been affected by fire this morning. What is the Secretary of State doing to ensure that we have more manufacturing capacity and more fill and finish capacity, and that we have a back-up in case something goes wrong, which would be devastating for the supply of this critical vaccine?

Matt Hancock: We absolutely have plans to make sure that we can get the vaccine out, even with significant challenges. We do not take any supply from the Serum Institute of India; that supply is for the developing world. Wockhardt, the company that does fill and finish in Wrexham, has put out a statement around the serious rain and flooding that there has been in and around Wrexham over the last few days, and this is obviously a critical factor.

On the hon. Gentleman's point about ensuring that we have the manufacturing capability, we are investing in that capability for the medium term. We can make so much of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine in the UK right now because of the work that was done with the vaccine taskforce over the summer, getting in the capability and the manufacturing. Even when the vaccine was not the major topic of discussion, we were working incredibly hard to expand UK capabilities. We took the approach that we should buy from abroad and make it here at home. It is about getting vaccine into people's arms, no matter where it comes from, so long as it is safe and effective and does the job. That is what is happening across the whole UK.

It is really good to finish with a question from a Welsh colleague, because it demonstrates that this is a programme that can, I hope, bring the whole country together. Everybody is on the same side trying to make it happen, and we will all keep working on it together. I thank everybody involved, and I thank all colleagues for their enthusiasm and support for the vaccine roll-out programme.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Secretary of State for responding to the urgent question. I am suspending the House for three minutes to enable the necessary arrangements for the next business to be made.

12.6 pm

Sitting suspended.

Business of the House

12.9 pm

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): The business for the week commencing 25 January will include:

Monday 25 January—Opposition day (15th allotted day). There will be a debate on a motion relating to council tax, followed by a debate on a motion relating to employment rights. Both debates will arise on a motion in the name of the official Opposition.

Tuesday 26 January—Remaining stages of the Environment Bill (day 1).

Wednesday 27 January—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Covert Human Intelligence Sources (Criminal Conduct) Bill, followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Medicines and Medical Devices Bill.

Thursday 28 January—General debate on Holocaust Memorial Day 2021, followed by general debate on UN International Day of Education. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 29 January—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 1 February will include:

Monday 1 February—Opposition day (16th allotted day). There will be a debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition. Subject to be announced.

Tuesday 2 February—Second Reading of the Air Traffic Management and Unmanned Aircraft Bill *[Lords]*.

Wednesday 3 February—Motion to approve statutory instruments relating to sanctions, followed by motion to approve the draft Value Added Tax (Miscellaneous Amendments to Acts of Parliament) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020 and the Value Added Tax (Miscellaneous Amendments to the Value Added Tax Act 1994 and Revocation) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020 (S.I., 2020, No. 1544), followed by motion relating to the Travellers' Allowances and Miscellaneous Provisions (EU Exit) Regulations 2020.

Thursday 4 February—General debate on the future of the UK space industry, followed by general debate on the Towns Fund. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 5 February—The House will not be sitting.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for giving the business, and may I tell everyone exactly what the Opposition day motions are? The first is on the Prime Minister's council tax hike, and the second is on the Government's plan to weaken employment rights.

I ask again about the Session because we need to know when we are likely to get our next Opposition day. I do not know whether the Leader of the House has seen the publication by the University College London constitution unit's Professor Meg Russell and Daniel Gover of Queen Mary on taking back control. The foreword was written by Sir David Natzler. One of the ruses the Government use is to prolong the Session: we have fixed dates for our Opposition days, so we only get 17 even though the Session is longer.

[Valerie Vaz]

I hope the Leader of the House will confirm that Budget day remains 3 March, with the periodic Adjournment for Easter on 4 April. I think the Prime Minister has resolved—although he has not told the House—that the elections will take place on 6 May, which just leaves a short period before the Session ends.

Our shadow Chancellor, my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), has said she cannot find the Chancellor, so can the Leader of the House confirm whether he is in Budget purdah now? I do not know whether the Leader of the House knows this, but my hon. Friend was the first woman ever to deliver the Mais lecture, and if anyone wants to read about fiscal responsibility, that is it.

The Education Secretary will make a statement later, but he has said nothing about testing in schools, which I think is part of the Moonshot programme. Apparently, that has been halted, so can he—or anyone—come to the House and explain what Operation Moonshot is?

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has not given an update on the NHS. Anyone who watched the BBC on Tuesday will have seen a woman in a morgue in tears, a consultant in tears, and a 28-year-old without underlying conditions taken into hospital with covid. We have had the highest rate of people who have died since the pandemic began; we need an update. A difficulty that I hope can be discussed is that while we have an Opposition day on Monday, we cannot have urgent questions that eat into our time. Is it possible to look at starting earlier so that we can have an update on the NHS crisis on Monday?

I want to put on record my congratulations to Richard Beeken at the Walsall Manor Hospital; it has a fantastic vaccination programme—17 minutes in and out, and at one stage it had the highest number of vaccinations in the country.

The Government need to be straight with us; no more Brexit promises. They are like piecrust promises—easily made, easily broken. We need the scrutiny Committee of my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn). We have musicians who cannot work and no visa-free access. My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) asked for the publication of what the two sides said during the talks on the agreement. Can the Leader of the House ensure that we have that publication?

Our fishermen have had to perform the Monty Python fish-slapping dance in the Government's face before the Government do anything. They have announced by press release the £23 million. Who is it for? How long will it take? Will it help the fishermen fill in the 400 pages that they need to fill in? We need a statement.

Worst of all, we have the news about a lorry park in Dover, in a village. This is being done without consultation and the Government are breaking the law again. Villagers are up in arms; this is in Dover, on agricultural land. May we have a statement on why the Government are breaking the law and upsetting local villagers?

I thank the Leader of the House for getting the Foreign Secretary to write to me, but he did not mention any of the dual nationals in his letter. Anoosheh Ashoori needs his diplomatic protection. Richard Ratcliffe and my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) have asked what plans will be put in place for Nazanin's and Anoosheh's release. Luke Symons' fate is still unknown.

Finally, I wish to congratulate President Biden and Vice-President Kamala Harris on their historic inauguration. Liberty, equality, climate, economic and social justice, and democracy are their watchwords. We, in the Opposition, want to work very closely with them, and we wish them every success.

Mr Rees-Mogg: May I join the right hon. Lady in congratulating President Biden and Vice-President Harris? I think we are both personally delighted that President Biden is the second Catholic, only, to be President of the United States; to have a fellow religionist in charge of the free world is very good news.

The Foreign Secretary pointed out in that letter the difficulties there are in dealing with dual nationals, because some countries do not recognise the concept of dual nationals, and that is particularly true of China and Iran. That was referred to in the letter and I will, of course, as I do every week, take up the points regarding the dual nationals who are held improperly in Iran.

To come to the right hon. Lady's tease about the titles for the debates on Monday, let me say that council tax is a matter for local authorities, as she knows. The Government have provided many billions of pounds to local authorities during the pandemic, including £4.6 billion of un-ringfenced money to help them deal with it. So the resources from the central taxpayer to help the local taxpayer have been enormous.

I am aware of the UCL report. I am afraid I think the idea of a House business Committee is cloud cuckoo land. We saw how unsatisfactory and divisive it was when this House did not have the Government able to organise the business during the 2017 to 2019 Parliament. It was chaotic for the Government and for Parliament, and it was very bad for the temper of political debate. A Government have the right to set the timetable in the House by virtue of the mandate they have got from the British voters, and then Members of the House have to be convinced on each individual issue that they wish to support the Government. I have to say that the right hon. Lady would be taking exactly that view if she were Leader of the House rather than shadow Leader of the House. I therefore think that a House business Committee would not be wise. I would be strongly opposed to it as I think it would lead to the sort of chaos and disruption we had in the last Parliament.

The right hon. Lady mentioned fiscal responsibility and the Labour party in the same sentence, which forgets the message left by a former Chief Secretary to the Treasury about there being "no money left". The last time the Labour party was in government it ran out of money, and one should judge people by what they do rather than by what they say. What the Labour party does whenever it is in office is run out of money. The right hon. Lady then mentioned testing. Some 52 million people have been tested. That is a large number of people and a very large percentage of the population, although, obviously, that includes many people who have had more than one test. We are talking about 700,000 tests per day. She then mentioned musicians. The position on musicians is extraordinarily clear. Her Majesty's Government have said that during the

negotiations we made proposals that would have allowed musicians to travel and perform in the UK and the EU more easily without needing work permits. These were based on the input of the music bodies such as UK Music and the Musicians' Union, but the EU rejected those proposals. Therefore, musicians are in the position they are in because the EU rejected those proposals.

The right hon. Lady then mentioned the fishing industry. There is £23 million in addition to the £100 million to help modernise fishing fleets, to recognise that any delays for the fishing industry are particularly difficult because of the short shelf life of fresh fish, and therefore the extra help is important. They have faced particular changes, but the advantages that our fishing industry will have are going to be reaped as the days and years go on. Already, we have an increase in the exclusive zone in which only UK boats can fish. We will have a 25% quota uplift at the end of five years, beginning at 15%. That will be very good for rejuvenating the fishing industry, and extra money is being provided to help ensure that that happens. It is a positive solution to help our very important fishing industry.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con) [V]: Is the Leader of the House aware that Morrisons and Aldi supermarkets have announced that they are to stock and sell more British goods in future? If we cannot have a debate on that, will he warmly welcome that initiative and encourage other retailers to follow suit? Does he agree that buying British is the practical and effective way to champion our local farmers and promote their produce?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Madam Deputy Speaker, normally it would be disorderly to have a prop, but on this occasion I have one that is a face mask, and as face masks are so strongly encouraged in the Chamber, I hope you will allow me a semi-prop face mask. I agree with my right hon. Friend that we should try to buy British where we can. Of course, I am not in favour of protectionism, but the British produce some of the best goods in the world, and it has to be said that Morrisons often provides my joint for a Sunday lunch. Its beef is not only delicious but also good value. Good-value British products are what we want, and we want to eat more of them.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP) [V]: May I add my congratulations to President Biden and Vice-President Harris? I hope that this Government will embrace the opportunities that their election offers.

After this week's urgent question on the Government's failure to maintain an EU visa exemption for performers, everyone must now be aware just how big a kick in the teeth this is for our music industry. The Minister for Digital and Culture wrung her hands but had nothing to say about rectifying the situation. When can we have a debate so that we can demand that the Government go back to the EU and negotiate a new scheme?

Keeping with the consequences of Brexit, let me turn again to fishing. Last week, the Leader of the House grabbed headlines with his jokes about happy fish. I hope he will now take it more seriously. We need an urgent debate on protecting our fish producers from Brexit red tape, including a six-month grace period and full compensation for the catches not landed and the lorry loads destroyed.

Earlier this week, the House voted overwhelmingly to reject the Government's plan to cut universal credit by £20 a week. We know that there is deep disquiet within the Tory party about this, with many simply bewildered at the Government's planned assault on the very poorest. Given the many billions that have been spent in the wake of covid, how can this clawback from the poor have any political or moral justification? We know that Opposition day debates do not change Government policy, so when will the Government put their proposals before the House, so that we can force them to do the right thing?

Finally, in a week when the 19th Scottish opinion poll reports majority support for independence, I ask again for a debate on this Parliament's response. Yesterday George Osborne—a man whose intervention single-handedly boosted yes support in the last referendum—demanded that the Government ignore democratic decisions. He seems to believe that if this Union cannot be maintained by consent, it must be maintained by coercion. If that is becoming the Government's view, surely this Parliament should discuss it.

Mr Rees-Mogg: As regards the musicians' requests, I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave the shadow Leader of the House. What the British Government asked for and offered was generous, and it was refused by the European Union.

As regards my comments last week, at least I did not joke about happy Members of the SNP, because that really would have been a joke too far; I do not think it has ever yet been achieved, but perhaps one day—we live in hope. I reiterate the £23 million of extra support for the fishing industry, the increased exclusive area for UK fishermen to use and the additional quota that is coming, with a 15% uplift already, going to 25% within five years. That is an enormous increase in our control of our fishing waters, which will ultimately repay the fishermen of the United Kingdom for the damage that was done to them when we joined the European Union. That is fundamentally important.

On universal credit, it was this Government, under my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), who introduced universal credit, and this Government have allowed an extraordinary increase in support for the most vulnerable in society, including the £20 a week uplift. That is £1,000 a year, in addition to the £170 million winter grant scheme; £380 million in free school meal vouchers in the summer; increasing the national living wage; an extra £670 million for councils to help families pay their local bills; and supporting the most vulnerable families with £165 million for the troubled families programme. This Government have shown their absolute commitment to the least well-off in society and have done their best in these very difficult times to provide the support that is needed.

Ultimately, all the hon. Gentleman wants to do every week is moan about the devolution settlement. The referendum was won by the Unionists in 2014. It was accepted that it would be for a generation. A generation is not a mere six and a half years. The Scottish people made their choice, and he is still grumpy that they did not make the choice that he wanted. This Parliament respects the free choice that the Scottish people made more than he does. When the SNP is in such an awful muddle with its rows and disagreements, with Mr Salmond

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

and Ms Sturgeon getting together and fighting like cats in a sack, it is a most disagreeable spectacle. That is why we should all support the Union and not leave it to the dangerous activities of the SNP.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con) [V]: People voted to take back control so that the Government would use the new powers to make their lives better, so will the Government urgently make time available for us to debate the VAT cuts, the new enterprise zones, the freeports, the policies to increase our fishing fleet, the policies to boost our domestic food production and the many other good ideas that Ministers should be queuing up to put through our House now we are an independent country?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My right hon. Friend is not only right but he reads my mind. There are great opportunities: the new financial services regulation, which will encourage innovation and competition; the faster and more agile clinical and regulatory regime that is going through with the Medicines and Medical Devices Bill; a revolutionary approach to gene editing, on which the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is consulting; freeports, on which the Treasury is consulting; and looking at public procurement differently. We are really taking back control and seeking the advantages, but I hope that my right hon. Friend will join in this enterprise and send a list of all his good ideas to every Minister so that we know there are more ideas bubbling away.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab) [V]: I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement and for announcing the Backbench Business debates next week and the week after. May I ask him again, though, whether on Thursday 28 January, when we have an important debate recognising Holocaust Memorial Day, which is the previous day, we could get some measure of protected time so that that debate can be heard in full? It will be very heavily subscribed and, as we know, urgent questions and statements eat into the time available for Backbench Business debates.

On 4 February, the two debates are a debate on the future of the UK space industry and a general debate on the towns fund. Those debates were previously scheduled for Westminster Hall but had to be rescheduled into the Chamber because of the closure of Westminster Hall.

I did not get in during the previous business—the urgent question on vaccination—to congratulate the directors of public health and all staff involved in the roll-out of vaccines here in Gateshead and across the north-east of England, but I hope that the Leader of the House will use his good offices to ensure that the region is not punished for the success of the roll-out here by having vaccines diverted to other parts of the country so that they can catch up.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I do not think the hon. Gentleman should use the second session of business to place the question he wishes he had asked in the first session of business, so I will come to the Backbench Business issues. There is always pressure on time, and it is a difficult balance. The debate on Holocaust Memorial Day is of fundamental importance. The Backbench Business Committee has of course decided to have two debates on that day, and that was a matter for it.

There are complications. I did my best today to protect time for Back-Bench business by discouraging my ministerial colleagues from making extra statements, including one from the Department of Health and Social Care, which then got an urgent question. It is not entirely under my control; it is between Mr Speaker, the Leader of the House's office and what Back Benchers ask for as to how time will be divided up, so I encourage the hon. Gentleman to lobby not just me but others who have influence in this area.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con) [V]: A couple of weeks ago I told the Prime Minister that Somerset County Council is misusing covid funds and that it had a moral duty to ring-fence the money. He did not disagree. The council—surprise, surprise—denied everything, but yesterday it renamed the reserve fund where the cash has been hidden so that it is now called the "covid reserve fund". Somerset does not trust Somerset County Council. Even its own experts cannot work out how much money it has been given—£32 million, £43 million or £60 million. We must see how the money is spent. We need a debate in the House. As the great King Alfred would have said:

"Ring out the narrowing lust of gold",

and:

"Ring in the love of truth and right".

Mr Rees-Mogg: Alfred the Great was, of course, a great educator and translator of works into English, to ensure a wider spread of appreciation of knowledge across his kingdom, and my hon. Friend is also seeking to increase knowledge across the kingdom. His point on the use of public funds is one of continuing importance in this House, which has always had a responsibility to ensure that taxpayers' money is well spent and that any money that is spent is audited and has an audit trail. Therefore, he is right to highlight this issue, and I hope that Somerset County Council will provide him with the answers he needs.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Those are simply marvellous quotes, I am sure. I remind Back-Bench colleagues that we will have a ministerial statement before we get on to this afternoon's Back-Bench business, so could they keep questions short and ask just one with perhaps not too many quotes? Equally, I ask the same of the responses.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP) [V]: A study by the consumer organisation Which? has warned that the use of cash, on which many rely, is in danger. Thirty per cent. of Scots reported being unable to pay with cash at least once when trying to buy something since March. Last year the UK Government vowed to bring forward legislation to protect the cash network. Natalie Ceeney, chairman of the Access to Cash Review, has warned:

"We are sleepwalking into a cashless society",

and time is running out. Will the Leader of the House therefore agree to speak with his colleagues in relevant Departments and ensure that the promised Bill is introduced in the coming months?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady raises a valid and important point. The elderly in particular rely on cash, which of course has the status of legal tender. Therefore,

the refusal of cash raises interesting questions already, but I will of course take up her points with ministerial colleagues, as she asks.

Darren Henry (Broxtowe) (Con) [V]: I welcome this Government's belief that there is a crucial role for rail in the recovery from the pandemic, helping the levelling-up agenda, economic growth and decarbonisation. I have no doubt that having the right infrastructure is the catalyst to build back better. With that in mind, will my right hon. Friend make time available to discuss the potential impact on the east midlands and Yorkshire if the eastern leg of HS2 is not delivered in full?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his support for the Government's infrastructure programme and the key to build back better. HS2 is a landmark infrastructure project, which will bring much needed extra capacity to our railways, increase connectivity between our great cities, and usher in an even higher speed economy than before. There will be an opportunity to raise this issue at Transport questions next Thursday, so I hope he will be lucky in that particular ballot.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab) [V]: The Government quite rightly extended the ban on evictions during this dangerous lockdown period. I have a constituent who has been made redundant after 17 years working for a faith organisation. Tia and her family have lived in a manse for that time, as part of her employment. She has to leave her home when her employment ends on 9 February. There is a loophole in the law: tied accommodation does not fall under the eviction ban. I think this is an oversight rather than intent, so will the Leader of the House confirm that the spirit and intention of the Government are that no one should be forced out of their home during this period, and could we find time in this place to rectify the legislation?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady is right to say that the aim of the Government was to prevent evictions during the pandemic, but also to ensure a proper and fair relationship in these difficult times between landlords and tenants. It is very difficult, from the Dispatch Box, to answer individual constituent concerns without notice, but I will undertake to take this matter up with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con) [V]: I am chairman of the all-party parly group on microplastics and, working with colleagues from across the House and the wonderful National Federation of Women's Institutes, we are considering the impact microfibres released from textiles in commercial and domestic wash cycles are having on our marine environment. The UK has taken a global lead on tackling microplastics in our oceans, including the introduction of the ban on microbeads in 2018, but does the Leader of the House agree that debating this issue in Parliament would help us all to understand the potential risks posed by plastic microfibres entering our marine environment?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am delighted to hear about the work of the National Federation of Women's Institutes, which does such important work across the country. My hon. Friend is right to say that the ban on microbeads in shower gel and other similar products has stopped billions of pieces of plastic from entering the marine environment. It is also right to say that more needs to be done to tackle other sources of microplastics. The Government have been engaging with industry to encourage businesses to do more, including signing up to Operation Clean Sweep to prevent pellet loss. I encourage my hon. Friend to continue his good work, though he may in the first instance want to seek an Adjournment debate.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind) [V]: More than nine months on since the first lockdown, limited company directors remain without financial support to replace lost income. The Chancellor and his Ministers have been briefed about a costed proposal for a directors' income support scheme, which would create such support. Will the Leader of the House schedule a debate in Government time to allow Members to discuss the merits of this proposal?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The Government have provided enormous support, over £280 billion in total, of which £65 billion has been to protect over 12 million jobs and has helped both businesses and individuals through the furlough scheme, among other things. There have been difficulties with finding the support that the hon. Lady is asking for, but the Government are obviously sympathetic to people in that difficult position, who do have access to other forms of support from local council grants and, of course, from universal credit.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): Everyone will recall the images from last summer of monuments being dragged into rivers and the statue of our greatest ever Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, vandalised by hooligans. I know my right hon. Friend will share my delight that the Government are introducing new legal safeguards to avoid pandering to the whims of the woke left in censoring our proud history. Will he therefore facilitate a debate in Government time on how we can look to further protect our history and our heritage from those who wish to revise our past and tear down statues and monuments?

Mr Rees-Mogg: In a funny way, the woke brigade have done the nation a service, because they have reminded people of the great heroes we have. With lots of statues that people used to walk past and not really notice, they suddenly think, "Gosh, that's Gordon of Khartoum. He's an interesting figure. I want to know more about him and what he did to put down the slave trade in the Sudan." I think this has helped remind people of our history and that it is a history we can be enormously proud of. British people did great things in this country and across the globe. We see that, actually, in the United States. When the United States sought its freedom, it wanted to ensure it had the freedoms that the people of the United Kingdom were entitled to at home. It is a most fantastic history that we should be proud of and celebrate in our statues and in our education, so we should be grateful that the wokery classes have had the effect of improving our understanding of our noble history.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD) [V]: Minority groups have been historically under-represented in health research. That could now undermine trust in the safety of particular vaccines. A recent survey found that 72% of black people are unlikely or very unlikely to take up the

[Wera Hobhouse]

covid vaccine. Will the Leader of the House ask the Minister for Women and Equalities—so no pressure on the Department of Health and Social Care—to make a statement to the House about what her Department is doing to build trust and the uptake of the covid vaccine among ethnic minority groups, including promoting the voices of scientists from ethnic minority backgrounds?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The Government are doing everything we can to encourage everybody who is eligible to receive the vaccine and we take this very seriously. It is important to deal with scare stories and errors, and remind people that having the vaccine is so much better than taking the risk of not having it. Covid is much more dangerous than having the vaccine is for anybody. The benefits of the vaccine are overwhelming, so we need to deal with misleading information.

I would also point out how well the newspapers are doing. A number of newspapers, including the *Daily Mail* in the last few days, have had detailed pieces by members of minority communities pointing out that the vaccine is safe. We need to encourage other opinion leaders, along with Her Majesty's Government, to make the case and reassure people from all walks of life that the vaccine is safe and beneficial. Even our sovereign has had the vaccine. If it is good enough for the Queen, it is good enough for everybody.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con) [V]: The Leader of the House will be aware that the Government have had to introduce emergency legislation several times over the last year. We now have a convention that they bring it to the House as soon as possible when it relates to the pandemic. As we heard from the Health Secretary this morning, we have a much brighter future to look forward to with the vaccine roll-out. We all expect to see falls in case numbers and, more importantly, hospitalisations and deaths soon. So can the Leader of the House assure me and the rest of the House that the Government will act with the same sort of urgency in bringing back the necessary legislation to relax the covid measures as and when the data allows that to happen?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend. His point is an important one. I remind him that the regulations lapse and have to be renewed, so any renewal of them will always require a debate and a vote in this House. But, as he said, a great deal has happened: 4.6 million people have had inoculations across the United Kingdom so far, and there are 1,000 vaccination sites already operating in England. Things are happening, as he says. In the meantime, we still have to maintain social distancing. We need to keep six and a half feet away from people. Think of me laid down flat: that is a bit short of the distance needed. We have to follow that, but as he says, we are making progress.

No one in the Government or this House wishes these restraints to remain a day longer than is necessary. No Government would wish to restrict these liberties. It has been done because of an emergency. There is no justification for having the restrictions beyond the point at which they are needed. That, I think, is a view held across the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): The Leader of the House paints a tantalising picture.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab) [V]: Storm Christoph has brought with it widespread and severe flooding across Warrington North, with many residents having to be evacuated and devastating damage to homes. It has been heartbreaking to receive photos and videos from inside constituents' homes in the worst-affected areas. I pay tribute to the work of the emergency services and Warrington Borough Council, which have been working throughout the night to keep residents safe. Given that flooding is likely to become an increasing issue due to the climate emergency and the fragmentation and continuing underfunding of risk management authorities with responsibility for flooding, can the Leader of the House please arrange for the House to debate the impact of Storm Christoph, which affects so many constituencies of hon. and right hon. Members across the House, and how we can build resilience to end the misery of persistent flooding in our communities?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady is right to raise this issue, which is one of concern across the House; the seriousness of flooding and the effect that it has on families and businesses is very severe. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs was here answering questions earlier and I know how hard he is working. As I walked to my office, I overheard him on the telephone, just before coming in to answer questions, trying to get more done to help people who are at risk of flooding. He is working tirelessly and the Government policy is there to help people. Some £5.2 billion will be spent on flood and coastal defences, which is double the previous amount, helping 336,000 properties over the next six years, in addition to the 300,000 properties that have been helped since 2015. I accept that if people have been flooded within the last 24 hours, the promise of £5.2 billion being spent is not a great comfort, but I can say that action is being taken to ensure that people will be safer in future.

Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con) [V]: At six months old, Hurley is one of my youngest constituents, but he has PKU—phenylketonuria—a medical condition where his body cannot process protein, which severely restricts his diet. Most ordinary food will be off limits. There is a treatment available called Kuvan that can be transformative, and it is available in many other European countries but not here. Can we have some parliamentary time to debate the challenges facing those with PKU and how we can ensure that the one in 10,000 babies born with it get the best possible treatment?

Mr Rees-Mogg: May I say how much I sympathise with my hon. Friend? Just before I entered Government, I had a case of a young child who needed a very expensive and unusual drug, and I am very glad to say that, in the end, that child got it. I encourage my hon. Friend to use every parliamentary mechanism he can possibly think of to campaign for this child. It is so important that we help our young constituents, who have long lives ahead of them.

Such issues are decided by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, which is the independent body responsible for providing evidence-based guidance for the NHS on whether medicines represent a clinical and cost-effective use of resources. The NHS in England is legally required to fund medicines recommended

through a NICE appraisal, usually within three months of final guidance. NICE is currently appraising Kuvan for PKU and aims to publish its recommendation in April. My hon. Friend may also wish to be aware that applications for generic versions of the drug may now be submitted.

Following the UK's exit from the European Union, the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency is the UK's stand-alone medicines regulator and has introduced an accelerated national assessment procedure. That is open to applications for generic medicines, as well as innovative medicines, and in a timeframe to reach a licensing decision in 150 days rather than the 200-day EU procedure. However, I have such sympathy with my hon. Friend and with the child and family in question, and I encourage him to keep knocking on everybody's door.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab) [V]: I add my congratulations to President Biden and Vice-President Harris on their historic inauguration. Last week, the former US President Trump imposed deliberately stringent sanctions on the Houthis in Yemen that cannot easily be undone. Far from targeting individuals involved in acts of terror, this decision is a death sentence for millions who will now be cut off from life-saving aid in what is already the world's gravest humanitarian emergency. Despite that, the Government have shown no leadership on this crucial issue, with no official response from the Foreign Secretary, and I am yet to receive a reply to my letter from 11 December. Can the Leader of the House please grant time for an urgent update on this critical matter?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I have always said that I will try to achieve speedy replies for Members when they ask for them, and I will certainly take this up with the Foreign Secretary to get a response to the hon. Lady's letter. The UK Government have been doing what they can in Yemen, both with funding and through diplomacy, to try to make a very, very difficult and sad situation better, but she is obviously right to try to seek further answers from the Foreign Office.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. This session finishes at nine minutes past 1, so I remind hon. Members to be as brief as possible.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con) [V]: I very much welcome Government schemes such as the lifetime skills guarantee, which will help adults in Stoke-on-Trent to upskill and retrain, but does my right hon. Friend agree that it will be a challenge to encourage people to take up such opportunities? Will he therefore agree to a debate to highlight the benefits and help to encourage more people to take up such opportunities?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education will update on the House on the "Skills for Jobs" White Paper shortly after business questions. It is really important, and my hon. Friend is right, to highlight the fact that there will be new flexible training that will give people the higher level of skills they need for good jobs, through 12 to 16-week courses, including a fast-track to interview. From April 2021, we will be supporting any adult aged 24 and over who wants to achieve their first full level 3 qualification—equivalent to two A-levels or a technical certificate or diploma—to access nearly 400 fully-funded courses. Things are happening and my hon. Friend is right to highlight them, but I cannot promise him a debate.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab) [V]: This week we got the disturbing news that the UK currently has the highest covid death rate in the whole world. Does the Leader of the House not have a sense of shame about his Government's handling of this crisis? Will he allow a debate on the lessons we can learn from those countries—including New Zealand, Vietnam and others—that have, unlike ours, effectively eliminated the virus by following a zero-covid strategy? Will the Leader of the House apologise for his Government's role in this human catastrophe?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am sorry to say that the hon. Gentleman is not helping matters. This is a global pandemic that has affected all countries. There has been a considerable spirit of co-operation between all parties in trying to tackle it, and trying to make party political points out of it is simply undignified.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): The Leader of the House may not have heard of a Teesside delicacy known as the chicken parmo, and may ask what it is. Well, I will tell him: a chicken parmo is a flattened chicken breast, covered in breadcrumbs, deep fried, covered in bechamel sauce and cheddar cheese, and served with chips, garlic sauce and, of course, a salad. Surely the Leader will agree with me that such a local delight, enjoyed by many throughout Redcar and Cleveland, including me, should not fall victim to any proposed junk-food ad bans. May we have a debate in Government time on online advertising for local food outlets?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Until my hon. Friend added the garlic sauce and the salad, I thought it sounded really rather delicious, but I am afraid I shall have to stick to my deep-fried Mars bar, which is free of garlic, which I have always thought the most ghastly stuff. There is a balance to be achieved: on the one hand, we need to reduce obesity in this country, and we know from covid how serious the obesity problem is; on the other hand, people have to be free to eat what they like—we are not going to have wartime rationing, telling people how much butter they can eat in a week or things like that. The Government are analysing the responses to the recent consultation, to which I am sure many MPs will have contributed. Of course, nothing can be done without the decision being made in this House.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP) [V]: As the Leader of the House may be aware, I have been campaigning on the issue of fire and rehire since it arose with British Airways. We heard warm words then, and have done throughout the past months, from the Prime Minister and various Ministers, but there has been little action. Indeed, we hear that the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is to review workers' rights, and that existing protections are under threat. With strikes ongoing or potential action at British Gas, Heathrow airport, BA Cargo and Go North West buses, may we please have a statement from the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on fire and rehire and his wider intentions on workers' rights?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The UK has a record on workers' rights of which it can be enormously proud, and there is every intention to maintain high workers' rights, which have been something to which the Conservatives have been committed throughout their history. It was, of course, Lord Shaftesbury who, when a Member of this House representing a Dorset constituency, pushed through the Factory Act 1847 to improve conditions in factories, so the Conservatives have always been doing such things and will continue to do.

On fire and rehire specifically, the Government have made it clear that businesses should not use it as a mechanism for cutting costs, but there are circumstances in which employment situations change in response to economic conditions.

John Howell (Henley) (Con) [V]: Last week, I was appointed by the Prime Minister as the leader of the British delegation to the Council of Europe. My right hon. Friend's predecessor as Leader of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), looked favourably on the idea of a regular debate to let people know what we are doing in the Council of Europe. May I push my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House a little on whether that idea finds favour with him?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Congratulations!

Mr Rees-Mogg: Madam Deputy Speaker, I join you in congratulating my hon. Friend on becoming leader of the UK delegation to the Council of Europe, and helping in its important work promoting democracy. I look enormously favourably on a debate on the Council of Europe in Backbench Business time.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab) [V]: I am proud to have not one but three maintained nursery schools in my Stockport constituency. Hollywood Park, Lark Hill and Freshfield serve my constituency excellently, and families across our country benefit from our maintained nursery school system. However, research by the National Education Union reveals that there are only 389 such schools left in England, many of which are located in the most deprived areas of the country. Will the Leader of the House agree to hold a debate in Government time regarding maintained nursery schools and fair funding for them going forward?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is always good to hear Members praising efficient organisations in their constituencies, and I hope that the three maintained nursery schools in the hon. Gentleman's constituency will note what he has said. There is obviously a variety of nursery provision, but I will happily pass this matter on to the Secretary of State for Education.

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): This week is Cervical Cancer Prevention Week. As smear tests are the best protection against cervical cancer, the charity Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust is using this week to highlight with its #SmearForSmear campaign the importance of all women of all ages keeping up to date with their screening. Our outstanding NHS GPs and sexual health clinics remain open even during this pandemic, so will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust on its important campaign; urge women across the country to keep up to date with their cervical screening; and urge both men and women to keep up to date on their screening per se, and to ensure that they speak to their GP if they have any health concerns?

Mr Rees-Mogg: This has been a worrying time for women who have had to wait longer than expected for their screening appointment. As ever, if people are worried about cervical cancer or notice any unusual symptoms—be they men or women—they should contact their GP as soon as possible. The national guidance for cervical screening is clear that, as far as possible, these services should continue to be offered to anyone due for screening. I know that many are worried about whether it is safe to attend their screening appointment. Many precautionary measures have been put in place and everyone receiving an invitation for an appointment should attend. Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust has been doing very good work to help communicate that, and our own "Help Us, Help You" campaign has been running all winter.

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab) [V]: The number of covid workplace outbreaks is higher this week than it has been during the whole pandemic. In a recent poll, only 49% of workers said that their employer has enabled social distancing, only 47% said that they have been provided with adequate PPE, and only 48% were certain that their employer has carried out a suitable risk assessment. Not a single employer has been prosecuted—not one. Can we have a debate in Government time to discuss the lack of employee protection from covid-19 in the workplace, before more working people die needlessly?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Ensuring that the workplace is covid secure is very important, and is a duty on employers—indeed, it is a legal responsibility. The Health and Safety Executive has powers to enforce, and local councils have certain powers of inspection. Companies have spent many millions of pounds to make their workplaces covid secure, and although nobody would say that this is perfect, I think that the work that has been done around our own workplace is a model for other employers.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): Throughout the pandemic, rail use has been down. More significantly, it is widely projected to remain down. Yet, with increasing costs, destruction and disruption, High Speed 2 continues to be built. A new petition calling on this House to debate High Speed 2 in the light of the new circumstances reached over 100,000 signatures in just a few days. With Westminster Hall currently not operating, will my right hon. Friend provide time in this Chamber for that important debate?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I will try to answer the broader question on Petitions Committee debates. I did undertake to try to find time for Petitions Committee debates, and that is a commitment I take seriously. I am liaising with others to try to find a suitable slot for that, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this point.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP) [V]: The Leader of the House will recall that my last question to him was in relation to the naming of an MP's office after two IRA terrorists. While I thank him for his subsequent letter, I would appreciate a meeting with him to discuss his suggested way forward.

On the subject of the victims of terrorism, we currently have the shameful situation of troubles victims right across the United Kingdom—and they are right across the UK—being told they cannot receive their troubles pensions payment because of a dispute about where the funding for this scheme will come from. Would the Leader of the House agree that such a dispute between the Government and the Northern Ireland Finance Minister, who might I add is someone who does glorify terrorism, is only adding to the pain of victims and that a compromise agreement is needed soon? Would he agree to a debate on a range of support given by the Government to victims of terrorism right across the United Kingdom?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising this issue. She does raise the most important and troubling points at business questions, and this one is of particular concern. It is absolutely essential that those promised troubles pensions receive the support to which they are entitled. This year is the centenary of Northern Ireland, and we must use it to celebrate it as an essential part of United Kingdom and to toast 100 years more—at least. It is only right that we try to resolve this issue and bring solace to the victims of terror. I will of course take this up with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. I cannot promise a debate, although I think this is a subject very worthy of an Adjournment debate—not that it is for me to tell Mr Speaker how to set his Adjournment debate timetable.

Fay Jones (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con) [V]: This morning, many of my constituents are dealing with flooding from the Rivers Usk and Wye, and I send my sympathies to all those who have been flooded, some for the second time in a year. The condition of the River Wye is a source of great concern to me and an issue I have been closely involved in, along with my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman). Could the Leader of the House grant time for a debate to ensure that this issue is properly aired and, most importantly, for an action plan to be agreed? We have been talking about this issue long enough, and rather than going around in a circle of blame, residents and farmers in Brecon and Radnorshire want to see the health of the river restored urgently, and so do I.

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is right to raise this, and also to raise it with the bodies that are responsible for the maintenance of the river. I hope that they will see these exchanges to know how seriously Parliament takes these measures. I would reiterate, and my Friend knows very well, the amount of money that is being provided for flood support on protecting properties and to ensure that better flood defences are in place. However, there are responsible bodies, some of them independent from Government, and this may be exactly the sort of encouragement they need to know that they are being watched in the actions they take.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP) [V]: Right now, for people involved in catching, rearing, processing, wholesaling or shipping fish from the UK to the EU, these last three weeks have been an unmitigated disaster. I know the Leader of the House himself quipped recently that fish in UK waters are now "happier", and he did so at a time when the rural economy in Angus and across Scotland was reeling from this unrelenting crisis caused by his Government. Would the Leader of House like to retract his ill-judged comments, and can we have a debate on the inadequacy of the £23 million compensation finally offered to the fishing sector, but also on that sector's need for ongoing compensation to mitigate the new costs of exporting its goods to the EU?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman mentions the general rural economy, and there was an interview in one of the Scottish agricultural publications recently saying that things seem to be improving. The price of lamb is up and beef prices are doing well, too, so there are signs of positivity within the rural economy. I would also point out the £23 million fund to help fishermen, in addition to the £100 million to provide modernisation of fishing fleets and to help the fish processing industry. However, the basic principle remains the same: our fishing waters are coming back to us in stages, and that will help our fishing community because the resource that the fish provide to the fishermen will be ours, rather than being taken by other people. This will lead to a resurgence in fishing, and the Government are providing the cash support to help that happen.

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con) [V]: The covid-19 pandemic has shown us why it is so important that we look after both our physical and mental health. To do that, we need a thriving health and fitness sector, and in Burnley and Padiham we have fantastic local businesses helping people to lead active, fit and healthier lifestyles. Businesses such as FX Fitness Experience run by Jamie and Josh help people not only get active but rehabilitate after injury. Will the Leader of the House join me in backing those businesses and facilitate a debate on how we can get them reopened and firing on all cylinders?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Madam Deputy Speaker, we have four minutes to go. We have done quite well today. May I congratulate you on keeping business questions on schedule, which is a rare achievement—almost a unique achievement?

My hon. Friend makes a good and important point. It is essential that we continue to look after both our mental and physical wellbeing, especially during the pandemic. This week, I was really delighted to attend a Blue Monday virtual drop-in, as did many other Members from various parties, organised extraordinarily well by the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist), who is a dedicated volunteer for the Samaritans. The Government have continued to support businesses through the pandemic. We are giving businesses forced to close by restrictions a one-off grant of up to £9,000, benefiting more than 600,000 businesses, and, as more businesses have been forced to close by the new national lockdown, more will also receive the monthly grants worth up to £3,000. Current restrictions are under constant review, and, provided that everyone plays his or her part and follows the rules and death rates fall, we are hopeful that we will be able to move out of lockdown steadily and businesses such as these will be able to open once again. The mental health issues are important and, dare I say it, it is not only Government who have a role to play; we all have a role to play in speaking to friends and family who we may think are lonely and need support. I know that, in my own case, I could be a lot better at it than I actually am.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Leader of the House. I will suspend the House for two minutes to enable the necessary arrangements for the next business to be made.

1.6 pm

Sitting suspended.

Skills for Jobs White Paper

1.8 pm

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the publication of a Skills for Jobs White Paper on the next steps for post-16 education reform.

Last October, I notified the House of our plans to introduce a dynamic programme of measures to reshape this country's further and technical education landscape, which is a key part of our mission to empower everyone in this country and level up those areas that have been overlooked and under-resourced for too long. I informed hon. and right hon. Members that the details of how we would do this would be spelled out in a White Paper, and I am pleased to announce its publication today.

The House needs no reminding that this country stands at a critical point in its history. We have some enormous challenges ahead. There is an urgent need to rebuild an economy injured by the covid pandemic. We have already outlined an unprecedented support package to protect jobs and offer retraining to those who have lost theirs due to covid-19, but beyond covid we must also forge a new identity as an independent trading nation. Both those challenges have exposed our need for a strong and flourishing technical education sector to fire up the jobs of the future.

This White Paper is our blueprint for that future. It will play a pivotal role in creating jobs and rebuilding our economy. Through the lifetime skills guarantee, we will help people train and retrain at any stage of their lives. Our new flexible digital skills bootcamp training will give people the technical skills they need for great jobs through 12 to 16-week courses, and those bootcamps will expand into other sectors, such as engineering. From this April, tens of thousands of adults will be able to benefit from almost 400 free courses, which will be the first phase in the lifetime skills guarantee. These fully funded courses, which range from engineering to healthcare and conservation, will be available to adults without a full qualification at A-level equivalent or above, to help them gain skills that are in demand and that will open up exciting job opportunities for them.

In April, we will also kickstart the expansion of higher technical education, as we work towards making it as easy to get a loan for an approved higher technical qualification as it is for a full-length degree. We will also introduce pilots to encourage more flexible and modular provision, so that courses are more accessible and convenient. Lifelong loan entitlement will be up and running from 2025 and will build on the changes we are bringing in through this White Paper. Learners will be able to fit study around work, family and personal commitments and retrain as their circumstances and the economy change.

This White Paper is going to put employers firmly at the centre of our local skills systems, working in partnership with colleges and key local stakeholders to shape technical skills provision, so that it better supports the local economy. It will introduce German-style local skills improvement plans, which will be led by business organisations such as local chambers of commerce. Those plans will identify the skills that an area needs

and spell out what needs to change to make training more responsive to employers' needs. In turn, our further education colleges will shape the courses they offer to meet those skills needs, and we will make strategic development funding available to help them do that. We will start the ball rolling with a small number of trailblazer areas this year, and we will pilot a strategic development fund of £65 million in 2021-22 to help providers reshape provision to meet local employers' needs.

By putting the employer voice at the heart of skills provision, we will ensure that technical education and training gives people the skills they need to get great jobs in sectors that the economy needs and boost this country's productivity. We will back this through £1.5 billion of capital funding to upgrade our further education colleges. Today we announced the next phase of the FE capital transformation fund, and last week we made the next wave of capital funding for T-level providers available, with £135 million available to those delivering them in September 2022.

As far as long-term plans are concerned, we are going to move to a more coherent, simpler funding model that we will design together with the sector, and we will consult on it later in the spring. It will ensure a far more focused approach to funding. The consultation will be guided by the principles of high value, greater flexibility for providers, and enhanced accountability, which will see providers taking greater responsibility for their results. By 2030, we expect nearly all technical courses to follow employer-led standards, so that we ensure that the education and training people receive are directly linked to the skills that they will need to get a job.

We will continue with our existing programme of reforms in areas such as employer-led apprenticeships and our T-level programme. All apprenticeship starts are now on employer-designed standards. We will support employers to make greater use of their levy contributions by improving the transfer system and having more flexible training models.

The White Paper will also extend our network of institutes of technology to every region of the country, and we will see a corresponding increase in higher-level technical skills in science, technology, engineering and maths. In this way, we will future-proof our workforce, so that we are ready to deal with a constantly evolving economic landscape.

All our reforms depend on our ability to recruit and retain top-quality teaching staff in the further education sector, so we will launch a national recruitment campaign for further education teachers, strengthen initial teacher education, improve the support that new teachers receive, and help to provide more opportunities for improved training and development, such as work experience, as part of our industry exchange programme.

When the Prime Minister announced the lifetime skills guarantee last year, he spoke of how we will align our further and higher education sectors. I can tell the House that we have published the interim conclusion of the review of post-18 education and funding, which addresses some of the key recommendations made by Dr Philip Augar in his report from 2019. I have laid copies of the report of Dame Shirley Pearce's independent review of the teaching excellence and student outcomes framework, and the Government's response, before both Houses of Parliament. Today I have also published the post-qualifications admission reform consultation, which seeks views on whether to change the system of higher education admissions and move to a system of post-qualification admissions.

Our proposed reform to the teaching grant for the academic year 2021-22 will allocate funding in a way that delivers value for money for students and the taxpayer, and increases support for strategic subjects such as engineering and medicine while slashing the taxpayer subsidy for such subjects as media studies. We want to ensure that our small and specialist providers, including some of our top music and arts providers, receive additional support, and that grant funding is used to support students effectively as well.

This spring, we will consult on further reforms to the higher education system, including the introduction of minimum entry requirements to higher education institutions and addressing the high cost of foundation years, before setting out a full response to the report, and a final conclusion to the review of post-18 education and funding, alongside the next comprehensive spending review.

The White Paper is a step change in how this country prepares people for their working lives. I know there is enormous cross-party consensus, and a real will on all sides of the House to make a real change in this sector—a change that has been needed for so long. I very much hope that all Members will work together to ensure that we can deliver on this. These proposals will ensure that people can learn the skills they need to get a great job, and have control over the means of ensuring a more fulfilling and productive life. This White Paper will be the lever to unleash our nation's creativity and talents, and will make this country an economic force to be reckoned with. I commend this statement to the House.

1.19 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement.

Let me start by paying tribute to the learners and workers, unions and employers, and colleges and training providers who have done incredible work over many years in providing skills, jobs and opportunities in the face of a Government who, for the past 10 years, have been more interested in slashing the further education budget. I am glad that today, after a decade of cuts to funding and opportunities, the importance of further and technical education to our economy and people's life chances has finally been recognised. But even when the Government get things right—and there are measures in this White Paper for which Labour has been calling for some time—they come too late for families, businesses and our country.

I support the principle of expanding the right to lifelong learning to include study for a level 3 qualification for those without one, but this will only serve to reverse the damage inflicted by years of Conservative Governments who cut learning entitlements and replaced them with loans, which meant that the number of adult learners plummeted. The Secretary of State said that he wants more talented individuals teaching in further education, but the cuts in FE funding over the past 10 years have led to huge cuts in real-terms wages, which is driving many talented teaching staff from the profession. While I welcome the principle of flexible funding to allow more learners to access the skills they need, the Secretary of State said that this will not be in place until 2025—years

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after those facing the risk of unemployment right now could have benefited. I am also concerned that the Government continue to pursue a system of loans that will plunge students into more debt and create barriers to learning.

On the lifetime skills guarantee, how did the Secretary of State decide which sectors would be included, and how many jobs in our economy are in sectors that have been omitted? Can the list of sectors change depending on the needs of individuals, employers and our wider economy? What conversations has he had with the metro Mayors and combined authorities about local skills needs? What support will be available to those who are not qualified to level 2, or are already qualified to level 3 but need to train for jobs in a new sector?

There is nothing here for community learning, English for speakers of other languages, or basic skills courses. What support will be available for these learners? What will be available to those who want to study towards higher technical qualifications other than new qualifications that are at least a year away from existing? Does the Secretary of State agree that we cannot have equality between further and higher education if only one of those routes benefits from maintenance support? When will the FE sector be given the long-term funding settlement that it deserves? Can he guarantee a sustainable settlement in the spending review this year?

We have already waited two years to get an interim response to the Augar review, and I remain concerned that the Secretary of State seems to be committed to a zero-sum game in which parts of HE have to lose—in funding, support or prestige—for others to gain. Does he agree that in fact the opposite is true—that we get the best results for individuals, communities and our country when they can get a world-class education by whatever route suits them, be it college, university or with an employer? On the teaching excellence framework, I am glad that the Secretary of State has finally abandoned the idea of a subject-level measure, as Universities UK, the University and College Union and Labour suggested he should, many months ago.

Most of all, the Secretary of State must surely realise that he has to act fast to address the disruption and uncertainty that our economy and labour market are experiencing. Almost one in 20 working-age people—1.7 million—are unemployed, and many more will feel that their jobs are at risk. They are worried about paying the bills, about their jobs and about their future, yet what are they being told today by the Secretary of State? That they can access more training, but not for a few months; that they can access new qualifications, but not for a year; and that they can benefit from flexible finance, but not for five years. I urge him to go much faster in offering support to people who need it immediately. If we are to rebuild our economy from the ravages of the pandemic and secure people's futures, we need action, and we need it urgently.

Gavin Williamson: The hon. Lady raises a number of important points. I almost had the impression that she might even want to work together on a common cause, but we did not quite get to that point.

We recognise that we want to invest more in our further education estate. That is why we have put forward the £1.5 billion capital programme. We recognise that we want to put more into skills for all young people, and for people of all ages who recognise that they need to gain new skills to advance their prospects or enter a different place of work. That is why we put £2.5 billion behind the national skills fund. We recognise that we need to invest more in our colleges. That is why we have had record rises in 16-to-19 funding, not only last year but this year. We want to continue to work with the sector to strengthen it.

I certainly take on board a number of the challenges the hon. Lady throws down. I think there is a real appetite on both sides of the House to ensure that not just young people but people of every age have the flexibility to pick up the new skills required in such a rapidly changing economy. We always want to bring measures forward much faster than we can, and I am always happy to work with her to ensure that any changes we bring forward in this House have the enthusiastic support of the Opposition. I note that the Labour Deputy Chief Whip, the right hon. Member for Tynemouth (Sir Alan Campbell), is in his place; I am sure he would be happy to facilitate that.

The measures will recast the post-16 education landscape. This is not about taking away from one to give to another; it is about making sure that all young people, whatever their choice, have a good choice. Our colleges are some of the greatest institutions in this country. They have such deep links with and roots in local communities, because so often they were forged out of those local communities by local businesses to satisfy local needs. We aim to bring those colleges back to the founding principles of further education and of their creation.

We want to deliver a revolution and reform of our college sector and our technical and vocational sector. Young people can achieve so much by having higher technical qualifications. For far too long, it has been felt that there is only one choice: to go to university. Actually, so often, taking a different route gives so much more to young people. We need to make sure that that message is out there. By taking it out there and making sure that colleges have the ability and support to deliver, we will literally change the future of hundreds of thousands of young lives, and the course of the lives of so many other people who need new skills to prosper and take on the new challenges they face.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Before we move on to the Chair of the Select Committee, I want to say that this statement will finish at 1.53 pm, so we will need brisk questions and brisk answers if we are to have any chance of getting everybody in.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con) [V]: My first ever speech in the House of Commons was about apprenticeships and skills, so I give a huge welcome to the White Paper, and to the Secretary of State's passion for further education. The White Paper will help us to close our skills deficit and ensure that qualifications and training are led by employer needs. The lifetime skills guarantee and the flexible finance will allow disadvantaged people to climb the skills ladder of opportunity at any age.

I note that the White Paper says that young people tend to get careers advice from their family, but also that just 28% of parents are confident about advising

their children on apprenticeships. That plummets to 21% for technical and vocational options. It is therefore hugely welcome that the White Paper pledges to toughen up enforcement of the Baker clause, makes funding conditional on compliance, and lowers the age at which children must be offered independent careers advice at school, so that it is given to those in year 7. Will my right hon. Friend make it his mission to ensure that schools encourage skills, FE and apprenticeships as much as they do university, and will he consider establishing a real UCAS for FE and skills?

Gavin Williamson: I know that my right hon. Friend has championed this not just in his maiden speech, but the whole time he has been in the House of Commons. He is absolutely right that it is not adequate to expect family members to be able to give young people the advice they need. I take the opportunity to pay tribute to Lord Baker of Dorking, who did so much in moving the amendment.

We need to toughen this up. I want to see parity of esteem—people looking at the choices they can take, and not just immediately moving to university. I would like UCAS to demonstrate that by having a list of college courses available to students, especially if we move to a system of post-qualification application. I think that colleges and what they can provide could be a much more powerful offer for so many young people.

I will happily take up my right hon. Friend's thought about having a parallel system to UCAS. It may also be worth looking at the options for bringing it together and making sure that UCAS includes college courses so that students can make the very best decisions for their futures.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab) [V]: Young people in my constituency of Blaydon need to know that they will have training opportunities for the jobs of the future, as well as the jobs we have now. How does this White Paper align with wider Government policy on the industrial strategy, and how do we plan the skills for future jobs?

Gavin Williamson: The hon. Lady makes an important point, and that is why we set up the skills and productivity board to look at some of the challenges. For many businesses, one challenge is that they are not necessarily looking at taking people on through a graduate route, where someone has to learn skills over a three-year period; often, they are looking for much smaller, bite-sized training. That is why the boot camps that we are launching in areas such as digital training and advanced engineering are so incredibly important, to ensure that the sector has the responsiveness it needs to satisfy the skills needs that so many businesses in her constituency are crying out for.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): A transformed further education system has the potential to unlock opportunity for so many young people, both in Hyndburn and Haslingden and across the country, by equipping them with the skills and training that they need to secure the jobs they want for the future. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, as we look towards our economic recovery, investing in further education has never been more important?

Gavin Williamson: My hon. Friend is so right, and many young people in her constituency will be looking for the opportunity to unlock their true potential. That will not always be through a university degree; so often, it is through our amazing further education colleges, which deliver for their communities. Making this investment and these reforms will enable them to go from strength to strength, while being absolutely rooted in the needs of the local economy. Let us make sure that we are training our young people in the skills that they need in order to get the jobs that are out there, as against skills that lead to no jobs.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD) [V]: The rapidly changing workplace makes it vital that people can acquire new skills throughout their lifetime. However, we know that mature students are more averse to taking on debt, and they are often unable to take on long-term repayments if those repayments take them up to retirement. Instead of introducing a lifetime loan entitlement, will the Secretary of State look at introducing a lifetime grant, similar to the Liberal Democrat idea of a skills wallet, which would give every person up to £10,000 to spend on education and training throughout their lifetime?

Gavin Williamson: The hon. Lady will see that this is an expansive package of support for people who want to get training and skills, which is very much designed and fit for the modern economy and responsive enough to shift with changing labour market needs.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con) [V]: In Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke, I am blessed with ceramic manufacturing giants, such as Churchill China, that want to skill up locally, and exciting research and development companies such as Lucideon, which is hoping to open an advanced ceramics campus. A full-fibre academy is launching this year at Stoke-on-Trent College's Burslem campus, paving the way to unleashing silicon Stoke. Does my right hon. Friend agree that by ensuring that high-quality vocational courses are developed to employer-led standards, we can make sure they will deliver meaningful and tangible opportunities for young people?

Gavin Williamson: I know that my hon. Friend has been championing the concept of silicon Stoke and ensuring that Stoke-on-Trent has not only the inward investment that is vital for the revitalisation of that great city but investment in the human capital, talent and resources that it has always had but that need enhancing. I look forward to working with him to ensure that that happens and that investment comes to the great city of Stoke-on-Trent.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab) [V]: I welcome the move towards local planning, and I draw the Secretary of State's attention to what is happening at Lancaster and Morecambe College, whose principal, Wes Johnson, is also a director of the local chamber of commerce. Every time I visit that fantastic local college, I am told that uncertainty caused by short-term funding methodologies can create uncertainty in planning strategies for meeting the longer-term need of the community. When can the further education sector expect a long-term funding settlement?

Gavin Williamson: As the hon. Lady is aware, we had a one-year funding round this year. Every Secretary of State always aspires to a multi-year funding round, and I think there is very much cross-party agreement on

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that. We were able to secure one for schools, and I very much hope that in the future we will be in a position to secure one for post-16 education.

Gareth Davies (Grantham and Stamford) (Con) [V]: Boosting skills will be critical for levelling up counties such as mine, Lincolnshire. Can my right hon. Friend assure me and everyone in the Grantham and Stamford constituency that our local colleges will receive the resources they need to fully achieve our ambitions for young people?

Gavin Williamson: In my hon. Friend's constituency of Grantham and Stamford, there is already great provision in colleges. We want to make it even greater and make sure they have the resources to grow what they are doing. We want to make sure they are truly linked in with the local economy, because where there are skills shortages in his constituency, colleges are the first places t which businesses turn to plug the gap. We want to make sure the economy and business are growing strongly and creating the employment that we all want in his constituency and all our constituencies.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab) [V]: The chief executive of City & Guilds, Kirstie Donnelly, says that it is a disappointment that today's statement focuses on existing announcements, instead of a clear vision for how we can collectively reimagine further education for the future. She also says that the Government should devolve power to the regions. In the Liverpool city region, we are ready to deliver the skills needed for the recovery from the pandemic. Will the Education Secretary make at least one new announcement today, and commit to giving the authority and resources needed to the regions to develop the technical learning that is needed for the recovery and the future?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Just a reminder that we need very brief questions if we are going to get everybody in.

Gavin Williamson: The hon. Gentleman obviously could not be bothered to actually read the White Paper, so I will send him a copy. He will notice that there have been lots of new announcements.

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con) [V]: I welcome what my right hon. Friend set out, including the essential role of industry and the extension of employer-led standards. Will he say more about how local skills improvement plans will work, with the right emphasis on the sectors and job roles of the future that he is talking about today, and versatile transferable skills to maximise opportunities and social mobility?

Gavin Williamson: I will take this opportunity to thank my right hon. Friend for his work in enabling us to proceed with this skills for jobs White Paper. Without his commitment and dedication, including the odd skirmish with the Treasury, we would not have made the progress we have made with the institutes of technology, which are already starting to transform young people's lives, and of course with T-levels.

On where we want to go, we really want business organisations to work with colleges, putting this on a statutory footing, very much like what we see in Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands, where they can co-design the qualifications they need and match the job needs of the local community. That will bring those businesses and the business sector into the heart of those colleges, ensuring that we drive employment and the right set of skills.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab) [V]: West Thames College in Isleworth has a strong reputation, long developed, for providing courses across the range, including basic skills and English as a second language, but also locally specific courses developed in conjunction with employers, such as in aviation, hospitality and media. With so many people in my constituency losing their jobs at Heathrow and its supply chain, courses will have to reorientate and colleges will have to provide retraining in other sectors. For people whose jobs will not come back for many years to come, will the training and retraining be available for colleges such as West Thames College, and will they be available to students on universal credit?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. We must have shorter questions.

Gavin Williamson: I will complement that with a shorter answer. The answer is very much so. Colleges will play a really important role in retraining. Obviously, there will be a different set of skills and certain industries will have retracted, but it is about making sure that young people and people of all ages get the right skills for the economy.

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con) [V]: I really welcome this forward-thinking skills for jobs statement from the Government. FE colleges play a huge role in levelling up rural communities such as mine. As my right hon. Friend knows, Newton Rigg College in Penrith, the only land-based college in Cumbria, is under strategic review by the FE commissioner as we seek to secure a new organisation to take it over. Will my right hon. Friend ask his Department and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to work with stakeholders to secure the future of this vital college, and ensure that the review process and subsequent negotiations achieve a positive outcome and facilitate a smooth transition to a new provider?

Gavin Williamson: I thank my hon. Friend for all the work he has done with me and, of course, the Minister for skills and colleges. We have appreciated him highlighting the challenges faced by Newton Rigg. We and the whole Department will continue to work with him and do everything we can to secure a sustainable future for the college by working with local partners.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab) [V]: As somebody who benefited from in-work technical education in my late teens, I appreciate the value of vocational qualifications, and I welcome much of this statement. However, if I understand the Secretary of State correctly, he has limited eligibility for the new courses to those with no qualifications at level 3. Cannot he see that many people qualified to that level could still need to retrain and may still need support? Will he consider making the system more flexible so that it genuinely meets the needs of working people?

Gavin Williamson: We will always, whether through the national skills fund or the lifetime skills guarantee, look at every measure that needs to be taken to maximise flexibility in the skills sector. These are important steps in the right direction. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his warm words, but I take note of the fact that, quite understandably, he calls for us to go a little further, as I am sure all Opposition Members would always ask us to do.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con) [V]: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on both his statement and the White Paper, which addresses the challenges of enabling those of all ages to obtain the skills that will allow them to realise their ambitions and to fulfil their potential. As he has indicated, to ensure its success there is a need for colleges such as East Coast College to receive an enhanced, simplified and multi-year funding settlement. I would be most grateful if he could do all he can to ensure that that is provided in the forthcoming March Budget.

Gavin Williamson: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the great work that East Coast College does. It is a brilliant example and has such a positive impact in serving its local community. It will be up to a comprehensive spending review to set any multi-year settlements—not the Budget, sadly—but we will be working on the simplification of budgets and the allocation of moneys, which will benefit and help many colleges in managing their finances.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Thanks to HS2 and the work of the East Midlands Development Corporation, the outlook for the Nottingham economy is very bright indeed. We need to use the time available to ensure that our population will have the skills to access the tens of thousands of jobs that we will add to our local economy. Will the Secretary of State commit himself to our having local control over his plans to ensure that they fit in with the strategies already in place?

Gavin Williamson: We want to ensure that local communities benefit from the type of major infrastructure investments that we are making right across the country, whether that is HS2 or other infrastructure. When the hon. Gentleman has the opportunity to go through the White Paper, he will clearly see that we want to put local business right at the heart of decision making. It is a model that has worked in countless countries, including Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands, and we want to replicate it, because those businesses are the ones that are seeking the skills, and we think they should be a key part of determining what is needed locally.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I really welcome this skills announcement. It is so crucial for enabling people to realise their potential, for levelling up and for economic success. Will the Secretary of State promise that science and engineering, particularly in the computer and digital field, will be at the heart of his education reforms in this area?

Gavin Williamson: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is so important that our colleges are at the forefront of ensuring that we have the skills needed for the new technologies and new emerging markets, which will be so demanding of skills, whether in green energy, digital or cyber-security. Colleges can play a pivotal role in providing those skills swiftly and quickly for the market needs.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab) [V]: Part of the problem is that too few leaders have personal experience, understanding or, indeed, respect for the work of further education settings. City of Bristol College can, and it is ready to support economic development and pandemic recovery, but it needs secure funding, nationally and locally, now. Will the Secretary of State direct local businesses, and particularly the West of England Combined Authority, to put the college front and centre of their planning, particularly for skills levels 2 and 3?

Gavin Williamson: We certainly hope that right across the country, and not just in Bristol, everyone sees colleges as a vital lever in delivering economic growth through delivering skills.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con) [V]: Level 4 apprentices go on to earn more than the average undergraduate. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, 30% of undergraduate degrees lead to negative returns overall. Does my right hon. Friend agree that rebalancing the system towards our neglected technical education sector is the right thing for young people and the right thing for the country?

Gavin Williamson: I absolutely agree. It is a real Achilles heel of this country. In this country, 10% of the 18-to-65 workforce has higher technical qualifications, as compared with 20% in Germany and 34% in Canada.[1] We have to address that skills deficit. This is where there is so much demand for the type of skills that people and businesses want. Of course, the outcomes for people who get those skills and that training are incredibly positive, not least in that they usually outperform graduates in earnings.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab) [V]: The Secretary of State has spoken passionately about the sector, but that is simply not borne out by what has happened over the past 10 years, which has been a story of cuts and lack of investment. What can he do to ensure that funding is guaranteed to continue into the future so that the sector can plan ahead?

Gavin Williamson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. This is something that I do care passionately about. Like so many Members in this House, I recognise that this debate should be about not just the 50% of youngsters who go to university, but the other 50% as well. We all recognise the importance of what our colleges provide. I recognise that there is a big task ahead and that there will be many demands. As I have touched on before, we have already delivered a £1.5 billion capital funding programme and a £2.5 billion national skills fund. We always need to go further with our colleges, but I recognise that substantial challenges remain. I can absolutely reassure the hon. Gentleman of my commitment to delivering for this incredibly important sector, because it really does change lives.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Final question, Robbie Moore.

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con) [V]: I know that my right hon. Friend is well aware of the great work that Keighley College, led by Steve Kelly, is doing in my

1. *[Official Report, 27 January 2021, Vol. 688, c. 4MC.]*

[Robbie Moore]

constituency in building up a good working relationship between the education and business sectors. Does he agree that it is crucial that our businesses engage constructively and work together with colleges to ensure that we plug the local skills gaps? Can he set out how the Skills for Jobs White Paper will make that happen?

Gavin Williamson: I am very happy to pay tribute to Keighley College for the work that it does. Obviously, this is a college that was born out of the industry that made Keighley great. We want to see an incredibly close relationship between business and colleges. We want to see local businesses really driving the design of courses. We want to make sure there is a clear understanding that working with those colleges not only benefits the businesses by providing the highly skilled individuals that they need to prosper into the future, but benefits the colleges by having that business input. I wish to see more and more businesses lending some of their expertise to the colleges, making sure that both are prospering out of this incredibly important relationship that we will put into statute.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank both the Secretary of State for his statement and hon. and right hon. Members for their co-operation in making sure that we got everybody in within the time available. I am sorry that I had to push people, but we have two debates to follow this afternoon for which hon. Members will have been preparing.

Point of Order

1.52 pm

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wonder whether I might seek your advice. During Women and Equalities questions last week, the Minister for Equalities told me that her first report on the disproportionate impact of covid-19 on ethnic minority groups in October had concluded that there was no evidence suggesting that ethnicity itself is a risk factor. That is not correct and creates a false impression. The detail of workstream 3 of the four workstreams that form "Term of Reference 3" states:

> "Further data, research and analysis on the above factors is needed to fully understand the disparities from COVID-19 to ethnic minorities."

That is the point that I was making. It continues:

> "In summary, the evidence shows an increased risk for Black and South Asian ethnic groups."

How can the Minister correct the record in what is a really important area and a subject of great concern to many black and ethnic minority communities?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am grateful to the hon. Member for her point of order and for giving me notice of her intention to raise the matter. I understand that she has also given notice to the Minister for Equalities, the hon. Member for Saffron Walden (Kemi Badenoch). I am sure that the hon. Lady was not implying in any way that there was any intention on the part of the Minister to give incorrect information. As she knows, I am not responsible for the accuracy or inaccuracy of anything that may have been said by Ministers from the Dispatch Box. I am sure that the Treasury Bench will have heard what she has had to say and that any Minister would come to the House as quickly as possible if they felt that any information had inadvertently been given that was inaccurate. She has made her concerns known to the House and I am sure that she will find other ways to pursue the matter as well.

I will suspend the House for two minutes to ensure that the necessary arrangements are made for the next business.

1.54 pm

Sitting suspended.

Backbench Business

Equitable Life

1.57 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con) [V]: I beg to move,

That this House expresses grave concern regarding the Government's continued inaction with respect to the injustice suffered by Equitable Life policyholders, the vast majority of whom have only received partial compensation compared to the confirmed losses directly attributed to regulatory failures despite the Government's acceptance of the Parliamentary Ombudsman's findings to compensate victims in full in relation to the maladministration of Equitable Life; notes the concern previously expressed by the Public Accounts Committee on the transparency and accuracy of the payments being made to victims; further notes the Government's failure to fulfil the Committee's request to publish an intelligible and transparent explanation to policyholders on how to verify the correctness of the compensation they have received; notes examples of grossly inaccurate payments, adjusted only when identified by policyholders, gathered by the Equitable Members Action Group (EMAG); notes the Government's continued insistence that there have been no mistakes in the methodology for calculating payments to policyholders; and therefore calls on the Public Accounts Committee and the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee to establish a joint inquiry into the accuracy of the payments made to victims of the Equitable Life scandal.

This debate has been delayed since 26 March 2020 because of the covid pandemic. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for finding the time for it, and the Leader of the House and Mr Speaker for allowing us to participate virtually in debates so that we can explore these issues in some detail. I declare my interest as co-chairman of the all-party parliamentary group for justice for Equitable Life policyholders. I co-chair the group with the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton), who sadly has a prior commitment and cannot be with us this afternoon. Our all-party group now has 289 members—almost a majority of the House—which demonstrates how important the issue is to all our constituents.

I want to set out several things during the debate and to frame it appropriately. The Equitable Life case is absolutely unique. There have been other failures of pension schemes and of financial institutions—failures that unfortunately happened, and where, quite rightly, the Government have not chosen to bail out the organisations. But this failure was unique. Back in the 1980s, Equitable Life started what can only be described as a Ponzi scheme. I distance the current Equitable Life board from what was going on in the 1980s, but the company then deliberately set out to create a scheme whereby it promised bonuses that could not be achieved and could not be sustained in the long term.

As a result, over 1 million people invested their money with Equitable Life, in the expectation that it was a safe and secure environment in which to hold their money. That led to a position in which it was all very well while the money was coming in, but when the money had to be paid out in such a way that the scheme was recognised as being unsustainable, action clearly had to be taken.

The Equitable Life case is unique because, of course, it was a conspiracy between Equitable Life, the regulator and the Government of the day. Equitable Life was considered too big to fail because if it did, the Government would have had to pick up the costs. The scandal went on, and the House of Lords was involved in setting aside the position way back in 1999, as a result of which Equitable Life closed to new business in 2000.

Some 10 and a half years ago, I was proud to stand and be elected on a manifesto—as was my hon. Friend the Minister—that promised full and proper compensation for the victims of the Equitable Life scam. Basically, people lost their livelihoods and the pension that they all looked forward to in their old age. It should be recognised that Equitable Life victims are typically retired nurses, teachers, civil servants and factory and shop workers, plus small business owners, who had no choice following the scandal but to set up a personal pension. The majority of those individuals had less than £20,000 in their pension pot.

In 2010, we promised the victims proper and full compensation, but neither has been delivered. Almost 1 million pension savers have received just 22% of the losses they suffered following maladministration. It is worth reminding the House that way back in 2008 the parliamentary ombudsman ruled that this was the most severe case of maladministration ever seen and that the victims' loss was directly attributable to a decade of serious, serial regulatory maladministration. It is therefore right that we set out to compensate the individuals affected.

So far, the Treasury has refused to disclose the full workings of the calculations of the payments that have been made. That can hardly be considered transparent. In 2010, we promised that victims' losses amounted to £4.3 billion and that they would be provided with full compensation. The amount was later revised to £4.1 billion, but so far only £1.5 billion has been allocated for compensation. The Government allocated £620 million to those already receiving an annuity, leaving only £780 million to share among the 1 million other victims, plus £100 million of contingency. That has meant that the pension savers have received only 22.4% of the money that they lost as a consequence of a decade of failure by the Treasury and the financial regulators.

Let us be clear about what else has happened. For some bizarre reason that I have never been able to fathom, those people who were classified as the pre-1992 trapped annuitants—the most vulnerable and the oldest victims of this scam—were excluded from the scheme. It is true that we were able, through lobbying and the good work of Ministers, to ensure that those victims received a one-off payment of £5,000, increased to £10,000 if they were on pension credit. That went some way towards compensating them.

The reality is that to compensate the entirety of those pre-1992 victims would cost no more than £100 million. They were excluded because of the position on their having taken out their policy before 1 September 1992. The question of what happened between them taking out their policies and 1 September 1992 seems bizarre. The ruling seems to have been that they could not have known that this was a Ponzi scheme and they could not have known about the regulatory failure prior to 1 September 1992, so even though they were in ignorance, they should be excluded. In my view, that is an injustice that we need to put right.

In addition, we seek to achieve full payment for the 895,000 traced pension saver victims, which would finally settle the unpaid debts covering their losses that were

[Bob Blackman]

incurred through no fault of their own. That would cost £2.6 billion and could be phased over time. We also want equality of treatment for the pre-1992 trapped annuitants, which could easily be met with the underspend of the £1.5 billion already allocated.

We need to see full transparency on the Treasury calculations. There remains serious doubt over the accuracy and reliability of the methodology that has been used by the Treasury to calculate moneys owed to qualifying Equitable Life policyholders as part of the compensation scheme that was established under the Equitable Life (Payments) Act 2010. The Treasury should disclose full details of how those calculations were made. The motion calls for the Public Accounts Committee and the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee to hold a joint inquiry into payment accuracy.

The Equitable Members Action Group, which represents the Equitable Life victims, has uncovered cases where policyholders were significantly undercompensated for their losses due to errors in the Treasury's calculations. In those instances, no attempt was made by the Treasury to contact the policyholders, and cases were only revealed following appeals made to the independent review panel. In all cases of appeal to the independent review panel, the appeal was upheld and the panel made recalculations that resulted in increased payments made to the policyholder. Not a single appeal has failed to be upheld. The most extreme case brought to our attention so far is that of a policyholder whose losses were calculated as £17, when they were actually £8,661. He won on appeal. EMAG is calling for a joint inquiry into the accuracy of the payments made to victims of the scandal, which is something we all wish to see.

We are all living through an immensely challenging and unpredictable period due to covid and the current economic position. The virus has had a significant impact on people of all ages, but especially the elderly. Many Equitable Life victims are currently confined to their homes, increasingly vulnerable and worried for their futures, which makes the need for this issue to be settled all the more important. This, after all, is a debt of honour. Equitable Life victims were pushed to one side as a direct consequence of the timing of the 2008 financial crisis, which saw the UK's banking corporations bailed out, while hard-working and responsible pension savers took the hit. The same must not happen again.

Equitable Life victims did the right thing and saved prudently for their retirement. The Government should now do the right thing by them. The current crisis has shown that money can be found when the political will exists. As I said, this is a debt of honour that must finally be paid. The compensation payments would be spent on or shared down the generations, and in doing so would be recycled in the economy, supporting the economic recovery that we all need.

I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to introduce the debate. I look forward to hearing contributions from Members on both sides of the House and to the response from my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary to the Treasury.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): As colleagues will know, a large number of Members wish to contribute to the debate, so I will introduce an immediate four-minute time limit. When Members are speaking virtually, a clock will appear on the screens of Members participating virtually and the screens in the Chamber. For Members participating physically, the usual clock in the Chamber will operate.

2.9 pm

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab) [V]: It is a real pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). I know that he, alongside the Equitable Members Action Group, the APPG, of which I am a member, and others, has campaigned extensively on this issue for several years. I also thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate.

This scandal will affect most, if not all, constituencies represented in this place. It has been, and continues to be, a long battle for justice and recompense for those affected. Many of the victims are now elderly and exhausted from this 20-year campaign. Some of them have sadly passed away. Many of them are former key workers—people who we in the Opposition have always known are the backbone of our country: nurses, teachers, civil servants, factory and shop workers. They are hard-working people such as my constituent, Mr John Petty.

Mr Petty is 84 years old and a pharmacist. He was sold an Equitable Life pension plan. At the time, he felt it was a decent and reputable firm. After a career working 70-plus hours most weeks, he sold his pharmacy in 1996, looking forward to a happy retirement with his wife. However, soon after, without warning and through no fault of his own, he lost a considerable amount of his pension. At 59 years of age, he had to go back to work. Mr Petty now has to budget every year, as living costs continue to rise but his pension does not. He said: "This whole saga has been disturbing, to put it mildly." He is not alone. There are nearly 900,000 people still waiting for their losses to be recovered in full.

I acknowledge that in 2010, the then Government accepted the parliamentary ombudsman's findings in full —that, between 1992 and 2000, Government Departments and regulators were responsible for maladministration, and that victims should be returned to the position that they would have been in had that maladministration not taken place. The ombudsman also found that victims had lost £4.1 billion. However, having accepted the findings in full, the Government then failed to give adequate compensation, offering only £1.5 billion. That is the crux of today's debate. All victims should be repaid in full, and there needs to be some transparency regarding how the Treasury calculated its payments.

I say politely to the Minister that, at a time when trust in the Government is low, the stubbornness displayed repeatedly by the Treasury in constantly dismissing requests makes it appear either to have a lack of care or to have something to hide. I and others simply cannot understand why, if the methodology used was sound and robust, it cannot be shared. Either way, it is not a good look for the Government. We call today for the Public Accounts Committee and the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee to establish a joint inquiry into the accuracy of the payments made to victims. Surely, if that would lead to a discovery that the methodology was flawed, it would save the Minister and the Government some embarrassment if they just showed transparency now.

We are not asking for much, but our asks would make an immeasurable difference to the victims. This is about fairness, transparency and trust. People who paid into their pensions in good faith should not be treated in this way. Those who are currently saving for their future need to know that their money is safe and that the Government will intervene if it is not. Just last year, the Chancellor said:

"We care very much about pensioners and making sure they have security and that's indeed our policy."

The Minister has an opportunity today to prove that those were not just empty words and that pensioners really are a priority. I sincerely hope he takes that opportunity.

2.13 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for the way that he introduced the debate, and I am proud, with him, to be a sponsor of it.

This has turned into a saga, which has now been ongoing for decades. The facts of the original case are well known; we have seen them demonstrated again and again. There were dubious practices. This was a company that was too big to fail. Perhaps, as my hon. Friend said, there was a conspiracy to stop matters coming to light before they did. There was a culture of manipulation and concealment.

In addition to the Treasury's own 2004 report, there have been other reports: the report from Lord Penrose in 2001, and a report from Ian Glick and Richard Snowden. All those showed lessons to be learned, both in terms of corporate culture in financial services and in terms of the state's role in overseeing the sector sufficiently. Everyone acknowledges that the company was primarily at fault, but the state has a role and a responsibility in regulating financial services. All business today is conducted on the understanding that ultimately, the law and the state ensure an honest and transparent playing field.

More than a decade ago, in 2010, George Osborne announced a £1.5 billion package in compensation. These payments were to begin in mid-July of 2011, but by the end of 2011, many of my affected constituents had not received a penny. Not only were there delays in payments, but some payments were made for incorrect amounts—sometimes wildly inaccurate. These were caught not by the Treasury, but by policyholders themselves. There is also a lack of transparency over how policyholders can verify that the amount they have received is correct.

The Equitable Members Action Group has pointed out:

"There is serious doubt over the accuracy and reliability of the methodology used by the Treasury to calculate what's owed."

The Treasury insists that there were no mistakes. If so, how can the Government explain inaccurate payments? One hundred and sixty complaints of inaccuracy in payment were upheld, yet EMAG reports only eight received recalculations. The Minister needs to explain how this happened.

We must remember that many hundreds of thousands of policyholders were affected by this scandal. The Government scheme offered only partial compensation. I know that full compensation would be expensive, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East said, let justice be done and let there be full transparency. People need to save for their retirement. Living off their state pension affords little comfort, and most people do not realistically expect to be able to live off it. Very few young people even think about their retirement. But these policyholders did save for their retirement. They are now getting on, and they are elderly and often vulnerable.

Over the years, I have received terrible, sad letters from many of my constituents, some of them received as much as 10 years ago. Some of them will now, I am afraid, no longer be with us. As one said, and this was nearly 10 years ago:

"This is a matter of urgency."

Another said:

"Sadly my husband died four years ago without the assurance that…he…would ever be recompensed."

One wrote:

"I am 89 years old, now a widow."

So I repeat the call from my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East: let us have an inquiry from the PAC, let us have the full light of transparency on this and let justice be done for some of the most elderly and vulnerable—and responsible—in our community.

2.17 pm

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): Campaigners have now been fighting for two decades for the compensation they are owed to cover pensions lost due to the collapse of Equitable Life and the UK Government's administration of the pensions industry. My Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath constituents were first let down by their own then MP, one of my constituency predecessors, Mr Gordon Brown, when he served as Labour Chancellor and then Prime Minister. In 2010, as one of their first moves in office, Conservatives and Liberal Democrats promised that money would be forthcoming, but 10 years on, my constituents and up to 1 million more people across the UK are still waiting for that fair and transparent settlement they were promised.

Donald Scott, the east of Scotland regional representative of EMAG, represents dozens of local cases where people are having to work well into what should have been their well-earned retirement. Others have had to sell their homes because of the shortfall in their pensions. He described the Chadwick report as "discredited", the financial offers made to date as "derisory" and rightly condemned the parliamentary ombudsman offer as a "pittance". My constituents want to know: how can the Government condemn benefit cheats or abandon 3 million self-employed for fear of cheating, when Her Majesty's Treasury continues to cheat the victims of its own maladministration?

The victims of this scandal have been cheated. According to Westminster Governments of every hue, they did the right thing and saved diligently for their retirement. The compensation offered to them amounts to 22%—often less—of the losses that they suffered. EMAG has identified cases of serious errors in the Treasury's sums, such as calculating the loss of one pensioner at £58 who actually lost over £7,000, and another, which has already been mentioned, at £17 when the actual loss was over £8,500.

The party of Government agreed in 2010 to pay £1.5 billion in redress for this scandal, despite accounts estimating losses to be between £4 billion and £4.8 billion

[Neale Hanvey]

and EMAG claiming that the true figure of relative losses is probably in the order of £6 billion. It is no wonder then that nearly 1 million policyholders feel short-changed of their pension and of their retirement.

In 2005, Equitable Life victim Liz Kwantes was so angry at losing tens of thousands of pounds that she had saved to provide financial security in her retirement that she stood for election against Gordon Brown in his and now my home constituency of Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath. She stood as an independent on that issue alone. While Mr Brown enjoys a gold-plated pension, she and so many others are still suffering because of the inaction of successive Westminster Governments. It cannot be difficult to imagine why this is causing some to question whether the delay is a cynical ploy to wait for those impacted on to die before receiving the compensation that they are due.

I can assure my constituents that they now have an MP who is firmly on their side, but, to date, that cannot be said of this Government. Last March, I was glad to be joined by 42 cross-party Members who signed my early-day motion, but that will be of little consequence until this Government honour their word and commit to increasing the available funding from £1.5 billion to the £4.1 billion required to cover the Treasury's own calculation of the true costs of full compensation to all victims.

2.21 pm

Mrs Heather Wheeler (South Derbyshire) (Con) [V]: I am afraid we are all here again, having another debate about Equitable Life and the dreadful way that our constituents have been dealt with. To begin with, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), my dear friend, for being so assiduous over this matter and for his continued chairmanship of the APPG. I congratulate the Backbench Business Committee on agreeing to have this debate today, even though it has been delayed for so long. However, I am very glad that we are here again—albeit unbelievably here again, and I see the poor Minister on the Front Bench yet again having to reply. We will hear some calm words from him later, I am sure.

The facts are so well known: 895,000 people have suffered dreadfully through no fault of their own, and the pre-1992 people are excluded as well. This is just a dreadful history of the bad leading the bad, and we hope that the good story that could come out of this really will be listened to by the Treasury. None of us is in a position to chuck money around, but ultimately, we all know that with these people, who are getting older, when the possibility of another £2 billion actually comes down to them and to their families, that money will be recycled straight away into all our communities and the Treasury will get it back in VAT or in whatever way possible.

I am not going to go on, Madam Deputy Speaker, because I know that lots of people want to speak, but on behalf of Michael, Colin, Tim, Kevin, Agnes and Peter, Tom, Patricia and Bob, Neville and Colin—dear constituents of mine who are suffering very, very badly—I really do want to see some wriggle room from our dear friend the Minister on the Front Bench. I sincerely hope that in the mix of conversations that are going on in the Treasury, particularly over the issues of these miscalculations, the fact that people had to appeal themselves, and the rise from 50-odd quid to 8,000 quid, it sees that it is a nonsense and that this pain needs to stop. I will finish there. The good people of South Derbyshire need to know that the Treasury is listening.

2.24 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab) [V]: I really do appreciate the opportunity to speak in this debate on behalf of the constituents who have contacted me over the years, having been victims of the Equitable Life scandal. As other Members have highlighted, almost 1 million pension savers have received back just 22% of the losses they suffered as a result of colossal maladministration. The Treasury has refused to disclose the full workings of the calculations behind the payments made to date, putting paid to the notion of a fair and transparent programme of compensation, which was promised to Equitable Life victims back in 2010.

The human impact of this scandal cannot be understated, and many of those affected by the collapse of Equitable Life are still bearing the costs of this injustice every day. As others have pointed out, Equitable Life victims are not individuals and families who can afford to write this scandal off as a kind of unfortunate administrative error. Typically, as the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) said, they are retired nurses, teachers, factory and shop workers, and small business owners with less than £20,000 in their pension pot. They put their hard-earned savings pension rights into what they understandably saw as an established, reputable and well-recognised provider, and they were badly let down.

My office has received harrowing accounts—others have said the same—from constituents in recent years, including, recently, a woman writing on behalf of her husband, who is now 89 and living with dementia. He is one of many who lost thousands of pounds by putting the profits of his small business into an Equitable Life pension, as he was advised. Another constituent, one of the many who received only 22% of their losses, as calculated by the Treasury, describes it in painfully frank terms. He said:

> "The amount I have lost would have enabled me and my family to enjoy more things such as holidays before I die."

He added:

> "I was amazed by the revelations that the successive governments had failed to regulate the Society properly. In such circumstances I expected government to ensure the losses sustained by policyholders were made good. I feel particularly incensed by the successive government administrations' failure to accept the report and advice of their Parliamentary Ombudsman that policy holders should be put back in the position they would have been if the maladministration had not occurred. I am even more incensed by the excuses they have made over many years".

That point about "many years" is worth emphasising. We are now 13 years on from the parliamentary ombudsman concluding that the victims' loss was directly attributable to a decade of serious serial regulatory maladministration. We are 11 years on from Equitable Life victims being promised fair and transparent compensation and from the coalition Government accepting that the victims' losses amounted to about £4.3 billion, before allocating only £1.5 billion for compensation. Many of those who were promised, who deserved and who indeed needed recompense are no longer with us, but the Government still owe it to those traced pension

saver victims still with us to find a solution quickly. As one constituent put it to me, "It is a policy decision that is now delaying and preventing action."

I urge the Prime Minister and the Chancellor to look carefully at the recommendations from the action group and the all-party parliamentary group as soon as possible. Every effort should be made to ensure that those who are owed compensation are identified and that the process of compensation is accurate and transparent. It is important that the Government, once and for all, get to the bottom of what happened, and we all look forward to the Public Accounts Committee and Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee responding to the proposal for a joint inquiry.

2.28 pm

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP) [V]: I think I can be brief, Madam Deputy Speaker, because there is no question: there is a huge and remarkable degree of cross-party agreement across the House. The question really is: what is the UK Government Minister going to do about it? I warmly praise the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for bringing the debate forward, and I praise the Backbench Business Committee too. I commend him for a balanced and passionate speech, with which I would very much associate myself. I also congratulate the Equitable Members Action Group and pledge my continuing support for its efforts. It has been very tough in keeping this going and making sure that this injustice is not allowed to be put into the long grass forever.

This is a historic injustice, but there are daily consequences for hundreds of people across Stirling, thousands across Scotland and 890,000 people UK-wide. Sadly, a number of policyholders have died still suffering the losses that were not their fault. As we have heard, there were three interlocking failures in Equitable Life: the initial failure of management, in that they were selling products they should not have been; the failure of shareholder oversight of that corporate entity; and then sustained regulatory failure—arguably collusion—in terms of allowing these products to be sold when they should not have been. There was no failure on the part of the investors. I agree with those who have said that Equitable Life in those days was effectively running a Ponzi scheme, but it was not marketed as such; it was marketed as a sensible, prudent investment, and it was taken up by people who were doing the right thing to provide for their own futures and the futures of their families. They did not make a mistake; they did not invest in a get-rich-quick scheme. They invested in something that they thought was a very sensible thing to do.

The facts of this matter are really not in doubt; this issue has been investigated to death. The parliamentary ombudsman has produced a report on it, we have had the Penrose inquiry, and the European Parliament's Committee on Petitions has also conducted a major inquiry—and all made the same recommendation that there was an injustice that should be rectified.

The findings have been well ventilated and the fact remains today that a settlement of 22.4% for the policyholders is unjust and unfair. It has daily consequences for hundreds of thousands of people across these islands, and it undermines trust and faith in the pensions sector going forward, so there are real-world policy implications right now. It is high time that the UK Government put right this historical wrong, and I look forward to hearing some better news from the UK Minister today than we have heard from his predecessors.

2.31 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): An 84-year-old widow in my constituency writes as follows:

"In the year 2000 our pension was £11,120, it is now £3,187. When my husband died in 2015 it was reduced by one third, so this accounts for some of the loss. It continues to go down annually. With inflation, of course, my loss is even greater than this. The state pension increases because of inflation, yet the Government give no consideration to EL annuitants who invested savings to ensure a decent standard of living in retirement.

When we heard that EL were having problems we were not that worried as we assumed the Government would step in. Why was not the same concern given to EL victims as to those now suffering financially because of the covid pandemic? The effect on us is just as great, and probably more long term. It is twenty years since this debacle began.

My life is very different to that we planned when we put our savings with EL: no holidays, no treats."

This is the sort of issue that gets politics and politicians a bad name, although 280 Members of this House have been trying through the good auspices of the all-party group on Equitable Life policyholders to put matters right.

In his able introduction to the motion, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) referred to the miscalculation for one pensioner who, it was said, was due £17 when the actual figure was over £8,500. He could also have referred to another miscalculation discovered by the Equitable Members Action Group: £58 was awarded, instead of over £7,000.

When mistakes are being made on this scale and of this magnitude, it stands to reason that the Treasury should not be sheltering behind any sort of argument or excuse as to how these sums are calculated. The methodology should be out there, and it should be capable of objective independent verification; it should not be necessary for appeals of this sort to go forward. *[Interruption.]*

My hon. Friend the Minister, chuntering from a sedentary position, anticipates that I was about to come to him next, and despite his obvious dissatisfaction with the point I have just made, I would like to say that he is a very sincere and fair-minded fellow, but he is the latest in a long line of Ministers who have had to defend the indefensible.

On interrogating my own website, I find that the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury in June 2010 was Mr David Gauke, and he said then:

"The coalition Government have pledged to make fair and transparent payment to Equitable Life policyholders, through an independently designed payment scheme, for their relative loss as a result of regulatory failure."—[*Official Report*, 8 June 2010; Vol. 511, c. 167.]

I said to him at the time how glad I was that that was going to happen. A little later, however, the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, Mark Hoban, had to defend the fact that it appeared that only a fraction of the losses were to be paid. I know that the ombudsman said that it would not be a matter of the entire sum being paid, but who can honestly believe that paying just 22% of a loss is a fair outcome? Both parties are to blame. Like me, the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for

[Dr Julian Lewis]

Salisbury (John Glen), was elected in 2010 on a manifesto pledge to settle this matter. It needs to be settled, and that has not yet happened.

2.35 pm

Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for securing it, debate and the Backbench Business Committee for granting it.

Over the past few days, my constituents have contacted me about this issue and have expressed deep concern about the Government's inaction and the injustice that Equitable Life policyholders have faced. Many policyholders have received only partial compensation and others have not received one penny. This debate is timely as it allows us to press the Government on the importance of pushing forward a full and proper consultation with policyholders and the Equitable Members Action Group to ensure that their concerns are raised, considered and addressed.

In 2010, Equitable Life victims were promised fair and transparent compensation. We have to remember that they were hard-working teachers, pharmacists, shop-floor workers and small business owners, many of whom spent their lives in service, caring for others. They have been short-changed, let down and swindled out of their hard-earned money. It is 21 years since the House of Lords ruled that the Equitable Life Assurance Society must close to new business due to being rendered financially unviable. Since then, more than 1 million people have been left with significant financial losses.

The parliamentary ombudsman concluded in 2008 that the victims' loss was directly due to decades' worth of regulatory maladministration. In 2010, the coalition Government accepted those losses and allocated £1.5 billion for compensation. That was 11 years ago; 11 years later, victims in my constituency are still waiting for compensation. That is not good enough. In the process of seeking justice and compensation, they have been denied transparency over how their payments have been calculated. Her Majesty's Treasury has refused time and time again to reveal the methodology that its advisers used to calculate payments.

The victims rightly feel as if they have been swindled out of their savings, and it is very hard to disagree with them. Only 22% has been rendered in compensation so far. That is not right or fair, so I ask the Government to consider the Equitable Members Action Group's demands. The victims have waited long enough for justice and compensation.

The Government must commit to ensuring full payment to all 895,000 traced pension saver victims. They must commit to ensuring full Treasury transparency over the way repayments have been calculated. They must commit to a Public Accounts Committee and Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee joint inquiry into payment inaccuracies. Finally, they must commit to ensuring that the oldest and most vulnerable victims receive equality of treatment with regard to the with-profits annuity contracts from September 1992.

Victims of Equitable Life's scandals have waited long enough. Now is the time for fair treatment in compensation. Now is the time to do right by them, so I hope the Government do the right thing.

2.38 pm

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con) [V]: It is a pleasure to contribute to this debate. I recognise the outstanding work that my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) has done not only in securing this debate but in his chairmanship of the APPG. Like every Member who has spoken so far, I have constituents who have been affected by this scandal. It is a scandal that people are fighting for what is rightly theirs. The Minister will not be immune to the fact that all contributors from across the parties are reiterating very similar points today, because the situation is affecting every part of the United Kingdom, and constituents are suffering as a result of it.

In advance of today's debate, I was contacted by constituents who have been very affected. One wrote to me to say:

"My dear father put me into Equitable Life because in 1970 he thought they were the outstanding pensions company and with an honest reputation."

The constituent went on to say:

"Luckily, he did not put all his eggs in one basket"—

they survived—

"but between himself and his wife they put in a substantial amount of money."

He concluded by saying that he recalled

"clearly watching it all go wrong and being horrified about what happened. As a result his wife and he both joined EMAG to help fight our corner."

That is a message I have heard time and time again.

Other hon. Members have suggested that the Government might be hoping that this will quietly go away—that as people get older and sadly pass on, this issue will somehow be forgotten. It will not be. I have another constituent who has been working on this issue for his mother for the past 19 years since his father passed away. This issue affects people now and their families are not going to forget about it either.

As we have heard, there are opportunities in the motion today for two of Parliament's Select Committees to work together to hold an inquiry. I hope they agree to do that and that we resolve some of the issues, but we need more than just another inquiry. The facts are the facts. They are very clear in this case. An inquiry would try to push the Government further, but I do not think that should be necessary. The previous coalition Government made it clear that an injustice had been served and that they were going to compensate people, but it is simply unacceptable that people have received just 22.4% of their claims. How would any of us feel if, at the end of the month, our salary was only 22.4% of what we expected it to be? These people put their faith and trust in a scheme, and, through no fault of their own, it has been devalued to such a level that the payments are simply unrecognisable in comparison with what they expected.

On behalf of my constituents here in Moray, and many people across Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom, I hope the Minister listens to what has been said in Parliament today. He knows I have corresponded with him on many occasions on behalf of local constituents. This issue is not going to go away. I know he is an excellent Minister who takes his job extremely seriously. I hope he will once again look at the issues put forward by hon. Members from across the House, so we can finally resolve this scandal and give closure to many of the people affected right across the United Kingdom.

2.42 pm

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con) [V]: I am pleased to have the opportunity to support the motion by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) and I applaud the efforts of the Equitable Members Action Group to date. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing this debate.

One of the most rewarding parts of being a local MP is the ability to bring local issues that affect our constituents to the attention of Ministers. On a daily basis, I get to speak to members of the public, such as Harry Cruddace from School Aycliffe, who ask us, as their representatives, to support them. Harry represents the many other victims in Sedgefield and across the UK. While running his own successful business, he made financial decisions he thought would enable him to retire properly, including the decision to invest in a pension fund with Equitable Life. As a result of its inability to deliver on its promises for Harry, he was forced to work for an extra six years to the age of 71. That took away a number of his best retirement years that he had planned to spend with his wife.

In 2010, Harry, along with about 1 million Equitable Life policyholders, was promised fair and transparent compensation. Given the parliamentary ombudsman's 2008 conclusion that the victims' losses were directly attributable to a decade of regulatory maladministration, this was a welcome and much-needed Government intervention.

I am not going to reiterate all the details that have been so eloquently communicated by other Members, but the victims of Equitable Life's inability to deliver on its promises included police officers, nurses and small business owners who were trying to invest prudently in a happy retirement with what was at the time a respected household name. I ask the Government to consider extending the financial support to fulfil the 2010 commitment to fair compensation for Equitable Life victims, ensuring that pensioners have security in their retirement—something that the Chancellor reiterated on 6 October was a Government priority. The benefits of this would be twofold. First, as a Conservative, I believe that those who made the decision to invest in their and their family's future, such as Harry, should benefit from that decision. Receiving the remaining 78% of compensation would afford many of the victims the ability to have the comfortable retirement that they had planned for decades ago. Secondly, Equitable Life policyholders receiving this compensation package could act as a much needed stimulus to the country. These are people who will spend this money when they get it; it is very unlikely to end up in savings. It can therefore stimulate part of the economic recovery by helping our small businesses, pubs and restaurants.

I ask that the Government commit urgently to the inquiries being proposed, but also that they put thought into how funds can be made forthcoming to the victims of this scandal as urgently as possible to give some relief to the people of Sedgefield and across the country who have been victims of this scandal.

2.45 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD) [V]: It is a privilege, but not a pleasure, to take part in this debate, it being 20 years on from the moment when more than 1 million policyholders lost part of their pension savings. They are still waiting for full transparency about what happened and justice regarding the retirement they planned and thought they were saving for. They are victims of maladministration.

We have already heard how Equitable Life policyholders who did not have with-profits annuities have received compensation worth only about 22% of the loss they faced, how in 2008 the Parliamentary Ombudsman recommended that policyholders should be put back in the position they would have been in, and how the coalition Government promised to do so. Numbers and statistics are an easy way for us to hide what that all really means. Hard-working people who have done nothing other than seek to provide for themselves and their families after years of work have had their lives turned upside down. Nurses, teachers and war veterans have all been left behind—and now, more than ever, we have seen exactly what being left behind can mean. Yesterday, in his inauguration speech, the new President of the United States, Joe Biden, asked Americans to walk in each other's shoes. That is advice that we would do well to listen to in this place. We should put ourselves for a moment in the shoes of those whose lives are behind the statistics—pensioners whose lives have been affected.

I have personal experience of knowing how important retirement pots can be at any age. At the age of 45, my mother was suddenly alone with three daughters. She worked miracles for us, none of which would have been possible without my father's pension pot. He was only 44, so it was not huge, but if it had been depleted by maladministration in the way that these pots have been, our lives would have been very different. Let us not forget that Equitable Life pensioners are not the only pensioners in this country who have been let down by successive Governments. I am sure that women who are approaching 70 and have had their state pensionable age changed feel a great deal of sympathy for the Equitable Life pensioners. There are so many in a generation who have been let down in their later years.

We must not now use covid or Brexit to shield us from the problems that still exist. They have not gone away, and, if anything, those involved will now feel further away from the Government than ever before. A constituent who wrote to me was one of the many people across the country who did not receive the full redress—in fact, less than a quarter of it. Grateful as they were, this is still a drastic depletion of their retirement funds. That is acknowledged by the Treasury but blamed on the state of the public purse—a bit much when we consider some of the spending decisions that have been made since.

Perhaps the worst thing in all these years, which have seen protests, lives lived and lives lost, is that this could have been avoided. No one should be penalised, particularly in their later years, for having done the right thing. The Treasury has not been transparent enough about how these payments came to be. It has not given this due diligence. Over 1 million people deserve better. Many people have had any semblance of financial stability whipped out from underneath them in what was and is one of our worst financial scandals. They deserve better. They deserve more than just another inquiry.

The coalition Government decided that people should be compensated. We must fulfil that now; it is our job in this place not to hinder it. We are duty-bound, morally bound, to help to fix this.

2.49 pm

Matt Vickers (Stockton South) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for the incredible campaign that he has been fighting for so many years to get justice for victims of a scandal that has caused so much pain to so many. We talk about numbers and sums of money, but this is about lives destroyed and dreams shattered—people who were responsible, and spent their lives saving for their and their families' futures, only to have it stolen away from them. They say you cannot buy happiness and that money isn't everything, but these are life-changing sums, representing years of work and saving, and there are huge impacts on people's quality of life in later years.

I recently met a group of constituents who are affected by this issue. I was told that the last time they had met there had been many more of them, because for some of the victims who lived in my constituency it is already too late. They will never see their money; they will never know justice. One man shared his story with me. It is a story that I will never forget and one that he is happy for me to share with the House.

Tom Coulson was born in 1935 to a working-class family. The son of a furnaceman, he lived through the war and is a grafter; he worked hard and did the right thing, saving to provide for his family's future. At 15, he got a job as an apprentice. At 28, after 10 years of night school, he qualified as a chartered mechanical engineer. At 39, he set up his own design and project management company, and began planning for his retirement at 60. At 56, his wife persuaded him to retire and put all the capital they could spare into an Equitable Life pension scheme. He is now 85 and life is not what he planned for, worked for, saved for, or deserves. Eighteen months ago his wife, Anne, was diagnosed with vascular dementia. She is wheelchair bound and living in a care home, reliant on funding from the local authority.

Tom has two assets. The first is his home. If he sells this, half will go to local authority assessment. He also has a joint life-assured investment plan, and any early withdrawal could see 50% taken into account by the local authority. Expenses on the upkeep of his home—and, for example, the £4,000 spent on skin cancer treatment last year—mean that he is now eating away at his working capital, promising future hardship, which could be prevented if the Government settled this obligation.

Tom's losses would have been a life-changing amount over the years. If recovered now, those sums would make a huge difference to Anne and Tom's life, allowing them to spend more time together, after 62 years of marriage. Mr and Mrs Coulson have lost a heartbreaking £264,000. I beg the Government to do justice: give these victims what they worked for, saved for, need and deserve.

2.52 pm

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab) [V]: A scandal like the collapse of Equitable Life has unimaginable repercussions for the lives of the victims, many of whom live in my constituency of Liverpool, Riverside. Ten years ago, when the life insurance company collapsed, policyholders lost billions of pounds in total, and the Government were forced to pay more than £1 billion in compensation, but the cost to the lives of those affected was far greater: pensions wiped out; lives destroyed; thousands dying before they received justice. People who had striven all their lives to save for a comfortable retirement had their plans and dreams shattered overnight—a burning injustice and one that undermined the wider confidence in saving for retirement. Everyone has a fundamental right to grow old with dignity and security, to relax and enjoy the fruits of a lifetime of endeavour. These victims were robbed of that opportunity.

It was the Government's maladministration that played a role in the collapse of Equitable Life, so it should be the duty of the Government to ensure that the victims are fully and fairly compensated, and that this never happens again. Every effort must be made to ensure that those owed compensation are identified, and that the process is accurate and transparent. The Equitable Members Action Group wants full payment for 895,000 traced pension saver victims, finally settling the unpaid debt covering their losses. Current levels of complaints and appeals clearly demonstrate the inadequacy of the system. A freedom of information response exposed the fact that in every case where a complaint had been raised—*[Inaudible]*—victims of the Equitable Life scandal, it resulted in an increased payment to the policyholder.

On top of this, the scheme has been unable to trace over 100,000 policyholders who are eligible for reimbursement. Many of them will now be in their 80s and 90s. As such, I welcome the proposal for a joint inquiry into the accuracy of the payments made, and I look forward to the response to that proposal from the Public Accounts Committee and the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee. Would the Government support such an inquiry?

A scandal such as Equitable Life should never be allowed to happen again, yet just last month the Government had to establish a new compensation scheme for London Capital & Finance investors, many of whom lost their entire life savings. Given the apparently flawed methodology behind compensating the victims of the Equitable Life scandal, what steps are the Government now taking to ensure that those eligible for compensation in the London Capital & Finance investor scheme are not short-changed and can have full faith in the compensation process? What action have the Government taken to make sure that such firms are properly regulated from now on, to ensure that such a devastating loss never happens again?

People approaching retirement deserve security and the peace of mind that they can grow old with dignity and comfort and that the savings they put away during decades of hard work will be safe. Flaws in our financial regulations have been exposed in such a disastrous way, and we cannot, a decade down the line, be found again to have been asleep at the wheel. We must tighten regulations, protect savings and uphold people's right to dignity in old age, and we must ensure that the 2,000 victims of Equitable Life in Liverpool, Riverside receive fair and transparent compensation.

2.56 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab) [V]: I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on securing this debate and on his many years of campaigning alongside the members of the Equitable Members Action Group and the APPG for justice for equitable life policyholders.

The Equitable Life scandal has deeply affected hundreds of thousands of people throughout the country and the lives of many of my constituents in Putney, Roehampton and Southfields. As has been said, these people are not rich; they are typically hard-working retired nurses, teachers, civil servants and factory and shop workers. The majority of them had less than £20,000 in their pension pot, so the scandal has affected them deeply.

The scandal has rumbled on for decades without a satisfactory conclusion. When the Equitable Life Assurance Society closed to new business in 2000, it left its 1 million policyholders with pensions that were worth far less than they had been told, resulting in significant suffering and financial losses. Many of the affected pensioners are elderly, and many have died or will die without ever having received adequate compensation, so the time for action is now.

One constituent of mine wrote to me in despair at how she had received only a quarter of her pension and was worried that, at 91 years old, there was not much time left for justice to be done for people like her. Last week, I met affected constituents, who said that they had invested in good faith—they had trusted Equitable Life and the regulatory system, but have lost money that they need now more than ever.

Following investigations of the scandal, the parliamentary ombudsman ruled that the losses were directly attributable to a decade of regulatory maladministration, including by the Government Actuary's Department in the Treasury. In 2010, the coalition Government accepted the ombudsman's recommendations in full and announced the creation of the £1.5 billion scheme to pay compensation to Equitable Life policyholders. However, given that the losses were £4.3 billion, that amounted to just 22.4% of the losses of the 895,000 traced pension savers. All those victims should be repaid.

I know that money is tight at the moment, but that cannot be an excuse for not paying. As one of my constituents pointed out, the tax Department would not accept him saying, "Sorry, I can't pay my taxes—it is too expensive," but that is, in essence, what people feel the Treasury is telling them. There were errors in judgment in existing payments and, as has been said, all the appeals in that respect have been upheld, so it is time for a joint inquiry into the errors in payments.

Now is the time to settle this debt and right this wrong. We may be living in an economically tumultuous period, but the current crisis has shown us that money can be found when the political will exists. It has also shown us the value of stimulating the economy by putting money directly into people's pockets when they need it the most. As one of my constituents said, "If you find something that is wrong, you should rectify it. This has undermined the whole system. Why would I tell my children to invest in pension schemes when this can just happen again?"

The Government owe it to the victims of the Equitable Life scandal in Putney and across the country to get this right, to fulfil the Government's promises, and to compensate the victims at long last.

2.59 pm

Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con) [V]: I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for allowing this debate, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on securing it, and on his co-chairmanship of the all-party parliamentary group for justice for Equitable Life policyholders, which I have been happy to join. He very eloquently set out the background to this matter in his opening speech, and I associate myself entirely with his comments. As he said, this situation has its origins in unique circumstances, and as the parliamentary ombudsman found in 2008, the victims' losses have been directly attributable to a decade of serious and serial regulatory maladministration.

These matters have been well covered so far, but I would like to make three brief points. The Equitable Members Action Group has raised doubts about the accuracy and reliability of the Treasury's methodology, and how it has been used to calculate the compensation payments made. I hope that can be addressed in the interests of open government, so that concerns in that area can be resolved. I also note the action group's call for a joint inquiry on payment accuracy by the Public Accounts Committee and the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee. I am a member of the latter Committee, and I note that call. I am sympathetic to it, in the hope that that this can be looked into further.

This is a very technical matter, but I think we should look at the human side of it as well. A recent Prime Minister said:

> "The British people are decent, sensible, reasonable and they just want a government that supports the vulnerable, backs those who do the right thing and helps them get on in life."

That really sums up some of the Equitable Life victims I have met in Gedling. I have met only a small handful of the 2,300 victims and their dependants in my constituency, but they come across as quiet, unassuming people who do not want to cause a fuss, and tried to do the right thing, work hard, and make the right preparations for their retirement. It is time that we tried to address their valid concerns. Equitable Life had a series of adverts in the early 1990s that traded on the solidity of its investments. A 1993 commercial finished with the slogan, "You profit from our principles". That appears not to have occurred, and I hope this is something that we can finally begin to address.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I would like to try to give everybody on the list a chance to speak. Therefore, with apologies to the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for giving him no notice whatsoever, I now have to impose a time limit of three minutes.

3.3 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD) [V]: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am delighted to take part in the debate, so absolutely no apology is necessary.

Here we go again. I think I have lost count—as you no doubt have, Madam Deputy Speaker—of the number of these debates we have had over the years. I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on obtaining the debate and on the work that he does with the all-party parliamentary group for justice for Equitable Life policyholders. I hope that if those on the Treasury Bench take away no other message today, they will take away this one: this case is simply not going to go away.

[Mr Alistair Carmichael]

The number of people who are affected will undoubtedly dwindle over the years, but this case will not go away until their claims are met and justice is given to them.

Others have made points about the handling of claims, and constituents who are in touch with me tell very much the same story.

There is just one point on which I would like the House to focus this afternoon, and that is the need for transparency from the Treasury on the compensation that it has paid out. The principle was accepted right at the start, as far back as 2010—I was a Minister in that Government, throughout the five years of the coalition—that there would be compensation for the maladministration. The source of the anger—as I say, it will not go away—is the fact that getting on for 11 years later, we have not seen full compensation.

The importance of this case goes beyond those who lost out under Equitable Life, because such treatment of people in similar cases continues to this day. Over the last few years, I have been working with constituents and other people throughout north-east Scotland who have lost money as a result of the fraud of Alistair Greig, director of Midas Financial Solutions in Scotland. He was eventually jailed for 14 years by the High Court in Scotland for running a Ponzi scheme. The financial services compensation scheme has started paying out compensation to the victims of that fraud, but let us just say that it did not do so willingly. My constituents and many others have had to put together and invest more than £2 million in legal fees to get the FSCS to the point where it was prepared to pay out.

That is the sort of situation that we find ourselves in when we have a culture—an attitude among regulators and others—in which it is okay to leave the little people, who have smaller claims, swinging in the wind. That is the attitude that has to change, and that is why Treasury transparency is crucial here.

3.6 pm

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con) [V]: I add my congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on securing this important debate. The long-running Equitable Life scandal has impacted a tragically dwindling number of people in my constituency. When I was first elected in 2010, I would have had numerous emails in my inbox asking me to attend a debate such as this, and to speak up in favour of justice and fairness for Equitable pensioners. Now there are very few. Tragically, many have died, and others have simply given up—given up waiting and given up hope.

These are people who did the right thing, or thought they had. They invested for their retirement and saw their savings cruelly ripped away from them decades ago. Back in 2010, the Government pledged to sort out the problem once and for all, and I am often reminded that that was the manifesto on which I stood. In my constituency, the retired nurses, teachers, shop workers and small businesspeople we have heard about this afternoon are still waiting. One of the things that they call for most is full transparency on the calculations done by the Treasury on the moneys that were owed to qualifying policyholders as part of the compensation scheme set up under the 2010 Act. There remains significant disquiet among a number of my lovely Equitable Life action group constituents as to how calculations about their entitlements were made. As we have heard repeatedly throughout this debate, there have been significant errors. A joint inquiry could well give my constituents, such as Reg, the answers that they want.

Little did I think when we passed this Act in 2010 that 11 years later, in 2021, we would still be fighting for justice for this small and, as I said, dwindling group of pensioners. I know that my hon. Friend the Minister will want to do the right thing. He is a good Minister, and I hope that this afternoon he can give some hope to my constituents who are still waiting in hope that the Government will deliver on their 2010 commitment.

3.8 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD) [V]: So here we are again. First, I would like to endorse the calls for an inquiry on some of the wildly inaccurate payments received by Equitable Life pensioners. That transparency is needed by those who are dependent on what they get through the Equitable Life scheme run by the Government for any kind of income in retirement. That is so important.

This is a reminder of how Governments of various colours have let these people down. It is clear to me that the Government, in their failure to regulate Equitable Life, allowed people a false sense of security when investing and doing what Governments of all shapes, sizes and political hues had encouraged them to do: provide for their own retirement. Those people then discovered, to their horror, that their plans for retirement—often modest plans—had been destroyed.

The Government's first response was to provide about half a million pounds of support. I am proud that my colleague Vince Cable was instrumental in ensuring that an additional £1 billion was provided in 2010, but even that is far short of the £4.5 billion that the independent ombudsman recognised was owed to the people who have been so cruelly hit by the Equitable Life crisis. People who have been encouraged to save and provide for themselves and their families in retirement, and who then dutifully take that advice, should not be punished and left to a retirement in penury because the Government of the day did not do their job in regulating Equitable Life properly.

In my community alone, 2,000 victims of the Equitable Life scandal are making the best they can of a reduced circumstances retirement. It seems to me that the Treasury is callously banking on the number of people in receipt and deserving of compensation reducing year on year. That is a tragedy, and the Government should step up right now. It is not only a historical injustice to the 2,000 people in my community who are Equitable Life pensioners that they have not been given their due payments and the retirement that they had saved and provided for. It is also damaging to our communities. Let us remember that if those 2,000 people in Westmorland and Lonsdale were to receive the payments they were due from this Government, it would make a big difference to our local economy. Morally and practically, it is right for this Government to do what the independent ombudsman called for some years ago and pay the full £4.5 billion to those pensioners.

3.12 pm

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for securing the debate, and I take this opportunity to thank very much indeed my predecessor, Sir Oliver Letwin, for all the work that he did on behalf of West Dorset constituents on this matter.

What is before us today is, I am afraid, a shocking example of regulatory failure, and we need to make sure that it does not happen again. It is also about us in this place achieving justice and fairness for many hard-working constituents who have saved for much of their lives. When approximately 2,000 of my constituents began contributing to their pensions at the beginning of their working lives, never did they think that they would lose their savings due to the errors of a company to which they entrusted thousands of pounds. Approximately 500 of my constituents have not received compensation at all. Most people have received around 22% of their pensions, but when we consider that most had less than £20,000 in their pension fund, the desperate nature of this scandal is clear; 22% of £20,000 is £4,400, which is nowhere near enough to retire on.

My constituents affected by this scandal did not work hard to play hard. They worked hard to save hard, and those savings were for their pensions. However, the loss of £30,000 from one constituent's pension fund meant that he had to work right up to the point at which he was physically unable to do so any more. His wife, sadly, passed away before this injustice was rectified, which I am very sorry to hear. Many other constituents have similar stories.

Equitable Life is not the only fund that has been mismanaged. I also have many constituents who were employees of AEATechnology. They were given incomplete information about the switching of their pensions from the UK AEA scheme, which was backed by the Treasury at the time, to the new scheme, which I am afraid was not. AEAT went bust in 2012, and the pensions were transferred into the Pension Protection Fund in 2016. The difference in indexation for inflation has seen people's pensions eroded greatly, in some cases by up to 20%.

There is a clear need for the joint Committee inquiry that my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East is proposing. I very much encourage the Minister and the Government to do all they can. Once again, it is important that we make sure that we focus on achieving fairness and justice for those constituents who have been wronged.

3.15 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD) [V]: I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on securing this important debate, which was scheduled to take place early last year, but has been much delayed, and I think that delay is at the heart of this whole issue. We now find ourselves in a situation where many of the Equitable Life policyholders have been retired for some time. Sadly, as other Members have alluded to, many have died, particularly the older policyholders in the pre-September 1992 with-profits annuity group, who never received any compensation at all.

The last time that the hon. Member held a debate on this issue was in 2019, and it is a tragedy that each time a debate is held, the number of policyholders who would benefit from the compensation is decreasing. That is simply not right. Time is limited, yet there has probably never been a time when the compensation would make more difference than right now. I know that is the case for my constituents who were Equitable Life policyholders.

The coronavirus pandemic has placed an enormous strain on financial resources for many people, and we have never experienced an economic case like this one. One group who were particularly impacted by the Equitable Life scandal have also been largely left to face the full force of the economic impact of covid without support: small business owners.

I believe there are some common themes between successive Governments' treatment of Equitable Life policyholders and the provisions and support for the self-employed and small business owners during covid. The first is arbitrariness. My constituents who were policyholders cannot understand why they should be merely given 22.4% compensation; they have been excluded. Secondly, there is the refusal to expand support, justified by reference to the public purse. When the Government have made a commitment to provide support, as they did when they accepted the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman's findings that victims should be compensated in full, they must follow through on their word. Thirdly, there is the very large degree of cross-party support. According to the website of the all-party parliamentary group for justice for Equitable Life policyholders, 282 Members of this place are members of that group. That is nearly a majority of the House, and plaudits for that should go to the determined campaigning of the APPG itself and EMAG.

Non-binding motions have previously been agreed by this House in debates just like this one, calling on the Government to make a commitment to provide full compensation, yet we find ourselves in the ludicrous position where, despite all that, there still appears to be no willingness from the Treasury to look again at the issue of compensation. How many more debates do we have to hold? How many more motions do we have to pass? How many more Members will have to join the APPG?

As I said earlier, delay is incredibly damaging, so I urge the Government to look again at the issue. I look forward to hearing from the Minister and to him making a commitment to providing full compensation. The Government should do so now, because we clearly cannot afford to waste any further time. This compensation has never been more needed. Justice delayed is justice denied.

3.18 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) [V]: May I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on setting the scene? With every one of these debates that I have attended, unfortunately there are fewer of my constituents who would receive the benefit. That is why today we again ask for the same thing.

In 2010, Equitable Life victims were promised fair and transparent compensation. To date, almost 1 million pension savers have received just 22% of the losses they suffered following the maladministration. That is hardly fair. Her Majesty's Treasury has refused to disclose the full workings of its calculations of the payments that

[Jim Shannon]

have been made, and that does not seem to meet the requirements that the Government set that all dealings must be open and transparent. I again call on the Minister and the Government, as he knows I often do, to make clear the method by which calculations are made, to ensure that victims do not continue to be left in the dark.

I have read of cases where policyholders were significantly undercompensated for their losses due to errors, yet I am given to understand that the Treasury made no attempt to contact those individuals. It is very frustrating. It is only upon appeal to the independent review panel that recalculations are made. What is of note to me is that every case has resulted in increased payments. Perhaps there is something there that the Minister could take on board. The process must be reassessed by the Treasury.

I have always found it difficult to reconcile the fact that, although losses were found to amount to £4.3 billion, only £1.5 billion was allocated for compensation for the victims. I have heard that the Government have allocated £620 million to those receiving annual payments, leaving only £708 million to share among 1 million other victims along with a contingency fund of £100 million. The working out of this has been explained to me: savers receive only an average of 22.4% of the money that they lost. Surely, Minister, we can and must do better. Those who have saved hard and consistently and prepared for their later life have been left disenfranchised. This is an issue for the Government and for the Minister directly to answer. Our constituents who contact us regularly have not forgotten about this. Their hard-earned savings have been lost.

The campaign has asked for numerous ways of helping victims, one of which is equality of treatment for those who took out with-profits annuity contracts before September 1992. They are the oldest and most vulnerable victims, and this could be easily met from the £140 million underspend of the £1.5 billion already allocated by Parliament.

Through you, Madam Deputy Speaker, I ask again that this matter be considered by the Minister and his team. Society is always marked by how it treats those who are less well off. Here is a supreme example of those who have saved hard, worked hard and risk losing out. I ask the Minister to please look at this again.

3.21 pm

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con) [V]: When people work hard and invest in their retirement, we praise them for doing the right thing. In so doing, these people tend to make fewer demands on the state in later life because of their financial independence. A constituent of mine has lost a small fortune because of the Equitable Life scandal. He received back only 22% of the sums he had invested, which will clearly negatively impact on his retirement.

I have been invited by my local EMAG group in Dudley to speak this afternoon. I have listened to and considered their concerns and, of course, I wish to represent them and support them as best I can, without ignoring just how generous the Chancellor has been in supporting the country through covid. I know that there are many competing priorities for the Treasury and that our public services are critical to tackle this dreadful pandemic. I am sure that Ministers and the Chancellor have enormous sympathy for those who have lost out because of the Equitable Life scandal. I understand that the Equitable Life payment scheme closed to claims in 2015. Taking into consideration the hardship that innocent members have suffered, I would welcome the thoughts of Ministers as to whether any consideration could be given to reopening the challenge mechanism. I ask this in the full knowledge of the financial predicament that we find ourselves in as a result of the pandemic.

People have been wronged, and my plea is that, when circumstances allow, we revisit the situation with a view to helping people who have still lost out. It would be very helpful if we could revisit the calculation of the compensation payments made, as concerns have been raised by the Public Accounts Committee. Moving forward, it is also important that future commissions of this sort are clearer and more transparent in publishing the calculation comparators that guide compensation payments.

3.23 pm

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con) [V]: I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for his tireless campaign. I do not think that anybody participating in this debate could fail to be moved by the stories that we have heard today. As one of my constituents said:

> "As time passes and age increases, the volume of our voices are decreasing, too, so we need to keep the volume of our situation loud and clear, and look to you being one of those who will raise yours."

Quite literally, we have heard time and again of good, honest, decent people who, after saving diligently all their lives, have had that ruined. What is striking is that this is not just about a select few or the better off, but everyone in society being affected. A total of 900,000 people affected by maladministration received just 22% of their entitlement. We know the story, and we know that it is wrong. As the MP for North Norfolk, where many people have enjoyed, and are enjoying, their retirement, I am staggered by just how many constituents have been affected by this terrible situation. I have 2,800 policyholders and dependants in my area alone. Listening to their stories is heartbreaking. Some have even given their permission for me to use their names.

Take Terry, who is 82. He retired as a plumber at 60 when his knees were too bad to continue working. He started saving for his retirement in 1979, diligently putting money away, but today all those years of saving amount to virtually nothing given the collapse of Equitable. Terry told me that he cannot afford holidays and has not had a holiday abroad for 20 years. How can it be fair that we ask people in society to take responsibility for themselves, good people like Terry save for a pension, and then, through no fault of those people's own, the pension company and the regulator fail in their duty to protect them?

We know that the Government accepted in 2010 that the victims' losses were in the order of £4.3 billion, but the £1.3 billion set aside has not gone far enough for those constituents, such as mine, who are having their happy retirement wrecked. It is pretty clear not only that Equitable had been misleading customers with

over-the-top returns and promises, but that the regulator had failed to protect customers, knowing quite well that the accumulated pension pots would not be worth what customers expected.

Let me quickly conclude with a heartbreaking story of another of my constituents. He too saved for years, but his pension is just a third of what it should have been, and it contracts every year. I will not reveal his name, but of all the stories, this encapsulates the dire situation that so many are left in. He said:

"I am sad that my wife died in 2007 but perversely, glad she hasn't lived to see that all the sacrifices she made to allow our pension pot to grow have all been in vain. She gave up many of the more enjoyable things in life because I said we would benefit in retirement. I could cry when I think about it. But I live in the hope that one day soon justice will be done and the government will pay its debts. I very nearly didn't make it a few weeks ago when the doctors thought I was to become another victim of Covid19. But I came through the night to everyone's surprise and now I just want to have what is mine and live a few years longer and enjoy them."

3.26 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con) [V]: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for securing this vital debate. Ever since my election to this place just over a year ago, I have been contacted by dozens of constituents from across Keighley and Ilkley asking for my support on this issue, and they have it. The Equitable Life scandal has gone on for far too long.

Fundamentally, this comes down to one simple principle: fairness. When we save for retirement, we expect the money that we invested to be there for us, but the customers of Equitable Life, even after compensation, have been left with just a fraction of what they were owed. The final report on the Equitable Life payment scheme in 2016 set out that compensation payments to policyholders equated to only 22.4% of their relative loss. Some victims have spent years campaigning for compensation. Very sadly, some people died before they could receive the compensation they were due.

In 2010, when the parliamentary ombudsman found in favour of savers, stating that there had been a decade of maladministration, many savers breathed a sigh of relief, expecting to be compensated for their losses. While I recognise that in 2010, the coalition Government took significant steps, despite tough economic circumstances, by delivering £1.5 billion in a compensation scheme, there were inherent unfairnesses in the way the scheme was administered. Some policyholders rightly received their full compensation, but others were unfairly excluded. These are people who have worked hard and form the backbone of our country.

I accept that this is not an easy position for the Government. Of course we have to strike a fair balance between the interests of policyholders and taxpayers. Our public finances, especially in the coming years, will be put under enormous strain as we recover from the terrible pandemic. But what better place to start building back better from the pandemic than delivering a fair and just outcome for these savers?

I know that the Government have already taken action to do all they can to prevent a scandal like this from happening again. I know that the Pensions Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), has worked hard as part of the Pension Schemes Bill to protect customers from reckless actions of pension bosses. But I urge the Economic Secretary to the Treasury to look at this again and see what more action can be taken to compensate those victims. Has he considered, for example, reopening the challenge mechanism, which allowed policyholders to identify errors? No one should be penalised for doing the right thing. We owe it to the Equitable Life generation to stand by them.

3.29 pm

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP) [V]: This is an incredibly emotive and serious topic, and I wish to start in the only way possible, which is to thank EMAG for all the fantastic work it does, and also to commend the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for once again bringing this most important of issues to the Chamber, of course with the assistance of the Backbench Business Committee.

Almost immediately on my election to this place in 2019, I, like many others, received correspondence from constituents who had been impacted by this appalling scandal. I will be honest and say that I was not fully clued up on all the specifics; after all, I had barely started secondary school in the year 2000, when this issue really took hold. However, after I had trawled through the record books, it quickly became apparent to me just how much effort Members on all sides of the House have put into trying to gain justice for those impacted—in the Chamber or through the APPG—and it is safe to say that, since 2010, the hon. Member for Harrow East appears to have been in the vanguard of that charge.

To be absolutely clear, I could not be more emphatic in expressing that my colleagues and I on the SNP Benches believe that this UK Government have a moral obligation to provide full restitution to those people who were victims of this appalling scam. I say "scam" because that is clearly what it was—a scam that induced people to put their hard-earned life savings into a scheme that promised huge bonuses and pay-outs, neither of which could ever have been delivered. Teachers, nurses, shop workers, factory workers, engineers, small business owners—the list goes on, and each and every one of them was swindled by this dodgy deal.

Despite the fact that a lot of time has passed, there will of course be the cynics who say that when people invest, they have to face up to the risks, but these were not normal risks. This was not simply a case of the stock market ebbing and flowing; this was a scheme that could never have financed itself. It was a con—a scam—with real victims. The worst part is that the Treasury, the Government and, indeed, the regulator all appeared to know exactly what was going on. They knew, but they never put an immediate halt to it, and that is why there is a moral obligation on the Government to provide the funds that people are due.

As Members are aware, and this has been mentioned across the House on numerous occasions today, the coalition did indeed put forward a £1.5 billion pot in 2010, but in reality, it does not even scratch the surface. We all know that about £4.1 billion was needed to fill the gap, and we all know that, as a result, some 895,000 policyholders have only got back about 22% of what they were owed. It is simply not good enough, particularly when we consider what the then Chancellor said in 2010:

[Stephen Flynn]

> "For 10 years the Equitable Life policyholders have fought for justice. For 10 years the last Government dithered, delayed and denied them that justice. It is time to right the wrong done to many thousands of people who did the right thing, saved for their future and tried not to depend on the state, and then were the innocent victims of a terrible failure of regulation."—[*Official Report*, 20 October 2010; Vol. 516, c. 960.]

Well, make that 20 years of dithering, delay and denial.

Sadly, the intransigence on this issue from the Government shows no sign of changing. Like others, I have written to them on many occasions, and the answer has been a flat no: "There is no money, and we consider the case closed". In reality, that has meant that good, hard-working people never received the pension money they were due, and it means that many more, including many of my constituents, will never receive that to which they are entitled.

I have been fortunate enough to spend some time in this House opposite the Economic Secretary, and he seems to be one of the few of the Government's Ministers who fall within the "reasonable" category. While I appreciate that he and his colleagues across the Treasury are under enormous pressure, I would simply say to him that where there is a will, there is a way. The dithering needs to end, the delaying needs to end and the denial needs to end. It is time to deliver what my constituents and so many others deserve.

I will bring my remarks to a conclusion, but, as I do so, I will say that my efforts and, indeed, those of all my SNP colleagues do not end here. We are proud to be members of the APPG and, working across this Chamber, we will not stop battling until those who are still without money gain the recompense they are due.

3.33 pm

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: As we have heard today, it has been more than 20 years since the House of Lords ruling rendered the Equitable Life Assurance Society financially unviable, and it has been over a decade since the then Chancellor announced the Equitable Life payment scheme to compensate policyholders who had lost out as a result of the scandal at that company, yet even after so many years, thousands of Equitable Life policyholders do not feel they have been treated fairly.

The Equitable Members Action Group continues to campaign tirelessly on their behalf, and during this afternoon's debate—I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on securing it—we have heard Members from all sides passionately setting out the injustice that so many policyholders feel. My hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) powerfully set out the upsetting case of the 84-year-old pharmacist she represents as an example of how the scandal has affected people living in constituencies across the country. My hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) spoke of the human impact on her constituent, an 89-year-old living with dementia, whose life has been hit by this scandal, alongside nurses, teachers, shop workers and so many others over many years.

My hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) emphasised how long the scandal has been going on, and spoke about the crucial importance of transparency, which I will return to. The importance of transparency was also underscored by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson), who spoke about the costs of the scandal to the plans and dreams of those affected, and the ongoing impact of current cases such as London Capital & Finance. My hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) spoke about a 91-year-old in her constituency and others who invested in good faith but have gone for decades without a satisfactory conclusion.

It is crucial that we learn lessons from what happened at Equitable Life, including about the wider importance of having a well-regulated financial services sector, as the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) said. In recent months, the cases we have seen at London Capital & Finance and Brewin Dolphin have underlined the importance of the Government's doing more to ensure that people are well protected in the first place.

On Equitable Life itself, the issue at the heart of the disagreement over the past decade has been how the payments to the vast majority of its policyholders have been determined. As we know, that has generated intense disagreement with the Government over their approach, and as today's motion makes clear, there is a further issue of transparency and trust. Many policyholders lack confidence that those payments have been calculated fairly.

In October 2020, my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), the shadow Chancellor, wrote to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, asking for the Treasury to set out clearly the basis on which it had calculated the payments that had been made to policyholders and to ask what assessment his officials had made of the overall accuracy of the scheme. In his reply, the Chancellor claimed that when the Equitable Life payment scheme was operational, it was fully transparent, and that its calculations methodology was published in full. He claimed that the Treasury had worked with the Equitable Members Action Group and others to produce a simplified explanation for policyholders.

Unfortunately for the Chancellor, the Equitable Members Action Group does not share his assessment. It contends that the Treasury refused full disclosure and hid behind commercial confidentiality. The group had to attempt to reverse-engineer the calculations, and it remains unsatisfied that payments can be shown to be accurate. It has presented cases of policyholders who received substantially less than they were due. In one of the most extreme examples, which the hon. Member for Harrow East drew attention to, it quotes a case where the Treasury calculated a policyholder's loss at £17, only for that to be revised to £8,661 when challenged. More widely, the group cites a freedom of information request that revealed that, where compensation had been recalculated following complaints, it resulted in an increased payment to the policyholder in every case—on average, by a factor of three.

A report of the Public Accounts Committee, under its former Chair, my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge), concluded:

> "Policyholders have struggled to understand how their payments have been calculated and cannot, therefore, check that the amount that they receive is correct."

In a letter to the Committee's current Chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch

(Meg Hillier), the permanent secretary to the Treasury restated the Government position. He said:

"no errors in the actual methodology have been found, including when the Equitable Members Action Group's own actuary examined the methodology."

Again, the group does not share the Treasury's assessment. It contends that the actuary acting on its behalf was denied the information he needed to validate the methodology used, and he could not verify the calculations for one third of the sample policies studied.

It is the Government's responsibility not only to do the right thing but to earn people's trust that they will do so. It is clear from the continuing challenge presented by Members of Parliament on behalf of Equitable Life policyholders today that that is not yet the case. I find it hard to disagree with the Equitable Members Action Group's view that the Treasury's refusal to be fully transparent only increases suspicion that something is wrong.

After such a long-running disagreement, we believe that a transparent approach is the best way forward, and that it is the only way to find a way forward that is widely trusted and accepted. We therefore look forward to the response from the Public Accounts Committee and the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee on this important call to establish a joint inquiry into the accuracy of payments made to victims of the Equitable Life scandal.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Gentleman and apologise to him that the timer has been put on. Can the timer please be taken off by whoever is controlling it? It is very distracting and it was not fair to Mr Murray to have those numbers apparently telling him he had to stop when he did not have to stop. I am sorry for that, but these technical hitches sometimes just happen.

3.40 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): Let me start, as others have done, by acknowledging the role of my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), his long-standing work on the issue and his success in securing the debate. I also need to declare an interest, as I did when I responded to the debate on 31 January 2019: my late father was an investor in Equitable Life and, therefore, I am keenly aware of the history and the importance of the issue to all concerned.

As we have heard and grasped again today, this is a complex and technical subject, the history of which has been very well documented over many years. I should also remind Members that the Equitable Life payment scheme closed to new claims over five years ago, so nothing has changed since that previous debate two years ago. Many of the speeches made today have covered the long and sad history of this matter. I do not propose to revisit all of that this afternoon. I do, however, want to remind hon. Members that the Government took more action than any of their predecessors to resolve this issue and committed significantly more funding than any other.

I appreciate that some investors remain disappointed by the steps that we took and would like to see further funds made available, but the Government have been clear and consistent in saying that this issue is closed and no further money will be paid out. This is in line with the ombudsman's report, which was explicit about having no expectation of the full amount being paid.

Dr Lewis: Will the Minister give way?

John Glen: I will not, because of time. Indeed, the ombudsman wrote to the APPG to clarify that position. Today, we have heard additional representations on the transparency and accuracy of the payments made by the scheme. I heard very clearly that point from my right hon. Friend and his reference to me during the debate, and I shall respond to that now.

First, the Treasury published the calculation methodology in full in 2011, as well as a simplified explanation to assist members of the scheme who were anxious about how it would work, with worked examples of the calculation. These explain how every payment made by the scheme was calculated. In addition, the Treasury incurred actuarial fees well in excess of £100,000, answering the questions reasonably posed by the actuarial representative of the Equitable Members Action Group, in an effort to ensure that there was maximum transparency to that group and to those members who were concerned, but no errors were found in the methodology. The group confirmed to their members that the payments to annuitants were accurate, and all this was set out in detail to the Public Accounts Committee in 2018.

Some hon. Members have spoken about policyholders who have received increased payments from the scheme, but given the closure of the scheme to new claims, I can only assume that these are historical cases. The Treasury is not aware of any corrected payments having been made to policyholders since the scheme closed, but I recognise that it may be helpful to go into some more detail on this point. The most critical determinant of the value of any payment is the input data received from Equitable itself, including payments in, payments out and the type of policy bought. Actuaries checked this data carefully and made any obvious corrections automatically before payments were made. But then the scheme also gave policyholders the opportunity to verify their own input data, which would be a significant driver of any errors, and where an error was found, the scheme corrected it and recalculated the payment. That is likely to have been what happened in specific cases that Members have raised today, and I believe that they show that the system that the scheme established to ensure accurate payments worked well.

The Government have taken significant action to resolve this issue and to balance the expectations of the policyholder with the needs of the taxpayer. The scheme was fully transparent, as I have set out. We published the calculation methodology in full. We made significant resources available to explain it. And we put systems in place to ensure that where there were errors in that input data and, therefore, payments, they were remedied swiftly. I appreciate investors' desire that the scheme should pay out more, but the Government's position has always been clear and consistent, both since the original announcement back in 2010 and since the scheme was wound down over five years ago. I am afraid that that position remains and will not change.

3.46 pm

Bob Blackman [V]: With the leave of the House, I would like to thank the, I think, 25 Back-Bench Members from five different political parties who have contributed to this debate. In direct answer to my hon. Friend the Minister, let us be clear: £280 billion has been found to shore up the economy because of covid; less than 1% of which would provide full compensation to the victims who have been waiting more than 20 years for it. Equally, had Equitable Life been allowed to fail, the people who lost their money would have been entitled to 90% compensation under the industry scheme, but they were denied access to that scheme because Equitable Life was too big to fail.

The reality, as has been mentioned, is that the Treasury has hidden behind commercial confidentiality in terms of displaying and disclosing the information necessary for individuals to calculate the compensation they were due, even under the reduced scheme. In addition, the pre-1992 trapped annuitants, who are the most vulnerable victims, were never singled out by any report until the Government laid legislation in 2010.

I ask that the House passes the motion by acclamation and that we get on with the inquiries. I call on my right hon. and hon. Friends at the Treasury to do the right thing and ensure that full compensation is provided to the victims of this terrible scam.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Gentleman. Although I am, of course, impartial in all matters that happen here in the Chamber, I am an enthusiastic member of his all-party parliamentary group and most grateful to him for all the work he does.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House expresses grave concern regarding the Government's continued inaction with respect to the injustice suffered by Equitable Life policyholders, the vast majority of whom have only received partial compensation compared to the confirmed losses directly attributed to regulatory failures despite the Government's acceptance of the Parliamentary Ombudsman's findings to compensate victims in full in relation to the maladministration of Equitable Life; notes the concern previously expressed by the Public Accounts Committee on the transparency and accuracy of the payments being made to victims; further notes the Government's failure to fulfil the Committee's request to publish an intelligible and transparent explanation to policyholders on how to verify the correctness of the compensation they have received; notes examples of grossly inaccurate payments, adjusted only when identified by policyholders, gathered by the Equitable Members Action Group (EMAG); notes the Government's continued insistence that there have been no mistakes in the methodology for calculating payments to policyholders; and therefore calls on the Public Accounts Committee and the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee to establish a joint inquiry into the accuracy of the payments made to victims of the Equitable Life scandal.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I will now suspend the House for a few minutes, to enable the necessary arrangements to be made for the next business.

3.49 pm

Sitting suspended.

Covid-19: Child Maintenance Service

3.54 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP) [V]: I beg to move,

That this House has considered the operation of the Child Maintenance Service during the covid-19 outbreak.

I will do my very best to keep my speech within that time, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this important debate, and all hon. and right hon. Members who signed my application and who are taking part today. I also thank the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), for attending today's debate in place of Baroness Stedman-Scott, who sits in the other place.

The Child Maintenance Service has been, and still is, a fundamentally broken system that requires urgent action through a root-and-branch review. In spite of calls from across the Chamber, from One Parent Families Scotland and from Gingerbread, it is yet to make the necessary changes. Nearly 750,000 children throughout the UK rely on the CMS. If the children of single parents who are in poverty and not receiving maintenance actually received the payment, it would lift 60% of all cases out of poverty.

The way in which the CMS has operated during this pandemic has simply exacerbated the existing problems. The whole of the Department for Work and Pensions has been under pressure during the pandemic, and staff have been working under incredible pressure to ensure that benefits are paid as quickly as possible. DWP staff have been rightly congratulated for what they have done, but the situation has affected the service from the CMS, which was failing many families even before covid-19 struck and staff were redeployed to help with universal credit and jobseeker's allowance. The CMS is letting down parents with care and non-resident parents, but it is ultimately the children and young people the CMS is supposed to serve who are being deprived of the maintenance payments necessary for their upkeep.

Single parents are bearing the hidden costs of children being at home all day, with expenses for things such as extra heating, food and supplies for home schooling. Some parents have needed to reduce paid work hours or stop employment completely during this period to care for their children. The financial impact means that many single parents are even more reliant on child maintenance payments. We need to see clear action from the UK Government to secure the financial support to which children in Scotland and across the rest of the UK are entitled.

The halting of the collection of CMS payments during the coronavirus lockdown has had a devastating impact on many single parents and their children, which is why the SNP has been calling on the UK Government to introduce a minimum maintenance payment to provide parents with care and their children a guaranteed income to prevent hardship and ensure a dignified standard of living. Our call has been backed by Gingerbread. In stark contrast, the Scottish Government are using their devolved powers to ensure that children and families are supported during this difficult time and to prevent them from being pushed into further hardship.

The SNP Government have led the way on tackling poverty this past year by introducing game-changing priorities such as the Scottish child payment, which is in addition to the Best Start grant, the baby box, free prescriptions and the mitigation of damaging Tory policies such as the bedroom tax. Westminster should be following Scotland's lead by scrapping the poverty-inducing two-child limit and benefit cap and by keeping the £20 uplift to universal credit and working tax credit and extending it to legacy benefits. The Scottish Government provide free school meals during school holidays and look after children from poor backgrounds in school during lockdowns.

The amount collected through CMS enforcement has decreased markedly during the covid-19 outbreak, with many of the measures that the CMS normally uses to collect payment going unused as a result of the reduced service. Although compliance has apparently increased to 72% during the pandemic, this has been driven mainly by the significant influx of parents enrolling on to universal credit and having CMS payments deducted automatically. Following the halt on enforcement last year, the UK Government must now commit to the resumption of collections and the clearing of arrears accrued. I hope the Minister will explain how the CMS plans to maintain and increase compliance as and when parents are to re-enter the workforce.

The DWP's own figures show that around 68% of parents on collect-and-pay contributed a form of payment in each quarter from December 2018 to March 2020. That was an increase on previous periods, but the figures must be treated with caution as they reflect only those who have paid some child maintenance in the past three months. Furthermore, every case under direct-pay arrangements is assumed to have paid the full amount; this prevents the DWP from providing an accurate reflection of just how high arrears have risen and by how much children are being deprived. The DWP's own survey in 2016 found that only 49% of direct-pay cases had an effective arrangement after three months, so the arrears figure is likely to be much higher than the DWP's figures show. Will the Minister agree to reconsider the CMS's definition of compliance, to represent the reality of child maintenance payments?

As of September 2020, recorded arrears had accumulated to £379.2 million—9% of all maintenance that should have been paid. Arrears increased by more than £100 million between March 2019 and September 2020 alone. The UK Government need to get a stronger grip of this by focusing on not just current liabilities but clearing the increasing arrears.

I understand that many people's incomes have been impacted by the lockdown. Many of those people are my constituents. A balance must be struck to protect children, which is why last year I called on the Work and Pensions Secretary to introduce a minimum maintenance payment where a parent with care is not receiving payments or where calculations have been reduced because a non-resident parent's income has been cut. The UK Government must step in and provide minimum maintenance payments directly to ensure that each child is receiving a minimum amount. That was required last year, and because of covid-19, it is still required now. Will the Minister give his assessment of a minimum maintenance payment and commit to seriously investigating it?

Parents are so dissatisfied with the CMS that four parents, backed by Gingerbread, Mumsnet and the Good Law Project, are seeking a judicial review as part of the #FixTheCMS campaign. It is a poor reflection of this Government's efforts and priorities that parents have had to resort to this course of action. For years, this Government have ignored warnings that the Child Maintenance Service is totally unfit for purpose.

The key way that the CMS can ensure proper payments and clear the arrears mountain is by using its enforcement powers. Since 2019, only three passports have been confiscated, and no driving licences have been suspended, despite persistent non-payment from tens of thousands of non-resident parents. Previous responses to my written questions have shown that the UK Government are not even recording how often maintenance debts are being referred to credit agencies. Will the Minister provide those figures and his evaluation of the use of the powers introduced in 2019? I hope he will commit to renewed efforts on enforcement and explain how he plans to achieve that.

During the pandemic, children are experiencing greater hardship. The UK Government should be supporting them in whatever way they can, not pushing them further into poverty by taking 4% of maintenance received through the CMS system. Even victims of domestic violence who cannot come to a voluntary agreement are subject to this tax. From 2016 to 2019, the CMS taxed parents a total of £70 million, and in 2018-19 it taxed more than £33 million. There is no justification for that, and I hope the Minister will respond to the points I have made and commit to reviewing the 4% maintenance tax.

The current fee of £20 to open a child maintenance case is a punitive charge. Parents should make a voluntary arrangement where possible. However, if a parent with care is turning to the CMS, it means that the voluntary arrangements have failed. This is needlessly taking money from children. The CMS collected £1.5 million in application fees in 2017-18 alone. I hope the Minister will provide clarity on why the UK Government insist on continuing to collect this fee and commit to reviewing it. At the very least, I hope he will consider abolishing the fee for people in receipt of certain benefits, as the Government did for victims of domestic violence. The UK Government have options, and they must use them.

The CMS does not provide an accurate or fair reflection of non-resident parents' income. Calculations are based on their apparent gross income. However, in many cases, some income is not even regarded as gross income and is not calculated. Parents must ask for a variation to include this, and it can only be asked for if a parent knows about it and if the income is at least £2,500. In 2017, the Government consultation proposed including unearned income in calculations, yet nothing has happened. In a written question in 2018, the Minister said that it required a change in primary legislation. Will the Minister confirm today that this amendment will be brought forward to ensure that calculations account for the total income of a non-resident parent? In addition, parents with care can no longer claim for a variation on the grounds of a lifestyle inconsistent with income—come on! These calls were backed by the Work and Pensions Committee in 2017 and by Gingerbread, so will the Minister agree to look into reintroducing those grounds for variation?

[Marion Fellows]

In a previous Parliament, my private Member's Bill asked for the threshold for recalculation of maintenance to be lowered from 25%, so that calculations can be more accurate without adding to the CMS's workload. Will the Minister agree today to conduct a review of the threshold, with a view to lowering it? The covid pandemic has exacerbated the problems, causing incalculable damage to children and young people because of the ineffectiveness of the CMS. It is more than time that the Government sorted this out, and I look forward to the Minister's response.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): We will begin with a time limit for Back Benchers of four minutes, which might have to be reduced.

4.5 pm

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con) [V]: I congratulate the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) on securing this important debate, and I thank the Minister for taking time earlier today to speak to me about some of the cases that are of concern to me in my constituency.

Once upon a time, I was the Minister with responsibility for the CMS, and my worry is that our debate will degenerate into an attack on the hard-working staff. I know from my own experience how diligent they are—sometimes in the most difficult of circumstances, trying to track down parents who refuse to pay and investigating those very difficult cases where people deliberately hide their income. I think there is a special place in hell for those who go out of their way to disguise income to prevent their former partner from being able to feed their children, or to buy school shoes or a new winter coat.

From the work that has been done by Gingerbread and others, I am conscious that single parents have been hit very hard during this pandemic, and we know that 80% of them are women. As Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, I am extremely interested in how well the CMS has coped with the many cases in which income has varied over the course of the pandemic. Of course, that means that variations will have to be efficient and quick. As parents come off furlough, it is possible for their income to go up as well as down.

We know that the strain on families during the pandemic has increased. I thank the Minister for the work that he is doing with victims of domestic abuse, and I thank my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister for the priority that he has given to that. It is important to reflect on the fact that not all domestic abuse is physical. Some of it is financial, and I have heard numerous times from constituents over the last nine months about the financial abuse they have suffered at the hands of ex-partners, and how the CMS has been drawn into that as variation after variation is requested and income is disguised. I have been privy to the emails from parents threatening, "Unless you agree to this figure, I will just keep asking for a variation so you get nothing."

I also heard this morning from a constituent who has been forced to contact her former partner's employer herself, because the CMS has not been in a position to chase up the direct deduction from earnings order that she was entitled to. She feels very strongly, and she is right, that she should not be the one who has to chase it up. If the CMS has a deduction from earnings order in place, it should be contacting the employer when the money has not gone through.

Finally, I would like to raise the case of my constituent Stuart McAuliffe, whose issues with the CMS long predate the pandemic but have been exacerbated by it. Some of that is about the fact that CMS staff did not have access to records at the beginning of the pandemic, but for years he has been asking for a breakdown of the amount that he owes in arrears—the charges that he believes were wrongly levied as part of a collect and pay arrangement, when he had been on direct pay and had been paying regularly. He feels very strongly that he should never have been moved to collect and pay, and that those charges have been accrued wrongly.

My constituent has asked for a schedule of payments, but he has been told that that information is not available. Surely, it must be available. Anybody who is involved with the CMS should be entitled to look at a breakdown of what they have paid, what arrears there may be and what charges may be on their account. The only information that he gets from the CMS is that it cannot provide him with that detail. I ask my hon. Friend the Minister if he will look at the case personally so that my constituent can finally get some resolution.

I think it is crucial that we recognise that the CMS is working in incredibly difficult times, and that it has many challenges in front of it. However, it is critical that paying parents and parents with care are given the support that they need at this difficult time. As the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw said, no child should be going without and no child should be suffering because of the CMS.

4.9 pm

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab) [V]: I congratulate the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) on securing this very important debate.

Given the immense pressure our welfare system has been under as a result of coronavirus, it is understandable that thousands of Child Maintenance Service staff were redeployed to help the team at the DWP to process universal credit applications and payments to meet the unprecedented demand during the pandemic. I thank them for all their hard work during this very difficult period. However, the Government neglected to consider the difficulties it would cause to single-parent households. In reducing the CMS to skeleton staff, children and single parents, 90% of whom are women, were left without protection. Hundreds of thousands of receiving parents are being left to struggle with missed payments that are not being chased up. Missed payments are spiralling into hundreds of millions and many families are now struggling to cope. Can the Minister tell us what plans the Government have to make up the backlog of receiving parents who have arrears owed to them, especially with the added financial difficulties due to the pandemic?

Last year, a survey of single parents conducted by leading charity Gingerbread uncovered the fact that three quarters of single parents have had—[*Inaudible*.] to food banks or charities to survive. Only 16% had received the full amount of maintenance they were due each month. On average, single parents are owed more

than £9,000 in back payments. The Government need to get a grip on this situation urgently and ensure that parents who owe child maintenance pay their fair share.

We must remember that these families are already among some of the worst off. They are now forced to deal with cuts to this vital lifeline, often alongside further loss of income due to the coronavirus. In my own constituency of Liverpool, Riverside, a massive 40% of CMS cases in the collect and pay service are not currently in payment. This is broadly in proportion to the rest of the country, demonstrating a staggering shortfall in payments to single parents.

The situation has been worsened by coronavirus, but these issues run far deeper. In June last year, we saw four single mothers launch court action against the DWP to challenge the persistent failure of the Child Maintenance Service. At that time, £354 million was owed to single parents and only 10% had been recouped by the CMS through enforcement actions. It is a child's legal right to be supported by both parents, but we have seen the service, designed to uphold that right, failing children and leaving many in poverty. Given that almost half of children living in single parent households already live in poverty, this triple whammy—of lost income due to covid, extra costs associated with looking after children not attending school and now losing out on vital child maintenance income—is leading to unimaginable hardship.

With the economic situation worsening every day, the Government need to take bold action now to avoid families being impoverished further by UK Government failure. Can the Minister tell us how the Department is working to reconcile staff shortages with a reduced assessment period from 12 weeks to two weeks for parents with a change in their earnings, particularly given the rise in unemployment? Will the Government consider offering direct payments to single parents not receiving maintenance without it having an impact on any of their other benefits?

These payments make the difference between a family keeping their heads above water and plunging into poverty. We need to see the Government commit serious funding to our welfare system, including the CMS, to ensure that single parents and their children are protected at this time of crisis and into the future.

4.13 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): It is a pleasure to see the Minister back at the Dispatch Box.

I begin with some good news. As an MP of nearly 20 years' service, I well remember the old unlamented Child Support Agency, which was cumbersome, bureaucratic and highly formulaic. I remember receiving an absolute plethora of complaints from both mothers and fathers—I had people in my constituency in tears from both sides of the fence, if I can put it like that—because of the way the CSA worked, or rather, in many cases, the way it didn't. If I speak as I find, I now receive far fewer complaints since the changeover from the Child Support Agency to the Child Maintenance Service. By and large, the CMS works far better than the CSA, not least because there is a different philosophy at work. Whereas the Child Support Agency compelled people to pay via a very strict and rigid formula, the philosophy with the Child Maintenance Service is, wherever possible, to encourage the people concerned to make arrangements between themselves for the benefit of their children. Most parents, even if their relationship has broken down, want to do their best for their children. The CMS encourages them to do exactly that, and in most cases it works well.

However, now for the less good news: where it goes wrong with the CMS, it goes horribly wrong. The CMS is particularly poor at pursuing parents—often, unfortunately, fathers—who wilfully refuse to pay. In many cases, they are not on a regular income under pay-as-you-earn, but adopt tactics such as becoming self-employed or registering as company directors in order deliberately to make their income as opaque as possible, not just to the taxman but to the Child Maintenance Service, so as to reduce their liability. I completely agree with the excellent Chairman of the Select Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes), who said, in effect, that that is utterly unacceptable.

I have a constituent, Miss Laura Panza, who has permitted me to raise her case in Parliament this afternoon, and with whom, I have to tell the Minister, I have been corresponding—I checked this morning—for almost six years. She is still owed arrears that total five figures. She has been fighting very hard for that money on behalf of her daughter to provide as best she can for her future, including her future education. I cannot possibly summarise such a complex case—the file is literally several inches thick—in four minutes; I probably could not do it in four hours. However, I can ask the Minister, on her behalf, if I could have a meeting with Baroness Stedman-Scott, the Minister in the other place, in order to raise Miss Panza's case directly.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): As my right hon. Friend knows, I am not the Minister directly responsible for this matter—that is the noble Baroness Stedman-Scott—but I speak on behalf of the DWP today, and I want to respond to his point and to colleagues who are going to make further such points. I can assure him and other colleagues that the Minister concerned will, within 28 days, meet all colleagues who are raising specific cases brought to her by individual MPs.

Mr Francois: The Minister has a deserved reputation in this place for being a thoroughly good chap. I am very grateful for that unequivocal answer. I shall certainly, on behalf of my constituent, take him up on his very kind offer, and then hopefully we can get justice for Miss Panza and her daughter.

Now that I have unmasked the problems of the CMS, I want to commend Gingerbread for all the very good work that it has done in campaigning to raise the profile of this issue for parents around the country who, for many years, have done nothing wrong—all they have done is to campaign to try to get the best for their children. In most cases, parents can sort these things out between themselves perfectly rationally, but where they cannot, and people wilfully refuse to pay, they need a more proactive and muscular CMS to hold those people to account. I hope that Gingerbread, by campaigning, can eventually bring that about. I am sure that the Minister will do whatever he can to facilitate it too.

4.18 pm

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con) [V]: I, too, begin by recognising the enormous challenges that have faced all parts of the DWP and, indeed, Government over the past 12 months. If ultimately more people in need got more help through redeployment, I can understand the difficulties that had to be faced. Like other MPs, I have been contacted by constituents who have experienced difficulties with reductions in payments. I welcome the commitment that calculations will be backdated. We must get back to normal service as soon as possible. I would like to make sure that the challenges and difficulties created by the pandemic do not mean that we forget the longer-term challenges, so, if I may, I will make some broader points.

We know that there are £350 million of arrears with the CMS, that £2.5 billion of Child Support Agency legacy debt is owed to children and that as much as £1.9 billion is due to be written off. Those figures alone tell us that we can and must do more. I do not know every single non-paying parent's circumstances, but I am not willing to hold back on my criticism of parents who could pay but do not, for fear of upsetting those who cannot. Let me be clear that in my view not financially supporting your children when you could is completely and utterly reprehensible. If you do this, you are the lowest of the low, in my book.

I understand that various measures including imprisonment are available. We confiscate passports and deduct money from people's wages, but the outstanding money shows that we need to go further. I want to pay tribute to the charity Gingerbread, which has worked and campaigned so hard on this issue. It says that in 2019 over 100,000 children went without payments while the Child Maintenance Service confiscated fewer than five passports and zero driving licences. I have heard from parents in my constituency who are not receiving the money their child is entitled to, and they have my full support. They want to see tougher action taken sooner, and so do I.

When it comes to arrears, I am afraid that we are much too quick to write off the debt. I seriously question the approach of writing debt off at all. That money is owed to a child, so what right does the state or even a parent have to say that they will forgive that debt? What kind of message does it send when we say, "You can be let off your obligations to a child"? In my view, we should never do that.

I want to finish by raising another area of consideration that I appreciate is full of potential unintended consequences and complexity. Why is it only up to one parent whether the other parent is pursued for the obligation in the first place? The state intruding uninvited into family arrangements should never be done lightly, but the financial circumstances of families with a parent wilfully failing to pay affects the finances of all families. It is not just a private matter. In effect, welfare and child benefit and the concept of parental responsibility and child maintenance operate entirely separately, but when it comes to poverty, hard-working families pay their taxes, making up the shortfall of the money not being provided by non-paying parents.

In the discussion on poverty and welfare, we hear again and again the scenario of the single parent struggling. Why are we told this about someone who is struggling? The implication is that they are struggling financially because they are a single parent raising their children on a single income. Quite rightly, taxpayers provide a safety net of support for children if that single income is not enough, but we should not forget that the first responsibility rests with the parent who is not contributing. As others have mentioned, research has found that in the UK, for the children of single parents who are in poverty and not receiving maintenance, maintenance payments being received would lift nearly 60% of them out of poverty. I wish the same amount of attention and publicity were given to the obligations of non-paying parents as is given to the obligations of taxpayers and the Government to step into their place.

I would like the Minister to give us his thoughts on how, when taxpayers are sharing the responsibility, our welfare system could reflect the implications of one parent choosing not to seek financial support from the other. I appreciate that we need to be mindful of domestic violence and other complexities in those scenarios, but we should not absolve an abusive parent of their obligations because they are an abusive parent. That would create a terrible perversion of the system. As far as I am concerned, not paying child support when you can is child neglect. If a parent who is looking after and caring for their child simply stops doing what we expect of them, we do not accept that. The state steps in, uninvited if necessary. That double standard is not right. I know that the Minister and the Department will rightly focus on the immediate challenges—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Gentleman has exceeded his time and he really must conclude.

4.23 pm

Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to speak today, and I would like to thank the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) for securing this necessary debate. The pandemic has had a detrimental impact on child maintenance payments to families in need. Despite the efforts of frontline Department for Work and Pensions staff to handle the increased demand for support, the disruption to the Child Maintenance Service due to the pandemic has been vast. It is increasingly concerning that the understaffing of the CMS has left families struggling. Lack of action on missed payments has left families pushed to the brink of poverty, unable to provide for their children. At a time when families have seen a decrease in their incomes across my constituency, it has been difficult for separated parents to support their children, especially with the ceasing of action to provide missed payments.

On top of this, it has emerged that some parents, when submitting evidence, are having trouble proving that they have lost their job and therefore their vital income. Many of them are unable to make their payments. This is a complete shame. The Government have yet another item to add to their growing list of failures and incompetence in handling services during this time, despite the efforts of the staff on the ground. I have heard testimonies of parents being told that their P45 does not provide evidence of their unemployment or their inability to make adequate child maintenance payments. I have heard from already struggling families

in Coventry who have told me about the lack of enforcement, because of a pause in the programme at the start of the pandemic. That has meant that they have had little financial support to assist with the upbringing and wellbeing of these young families. I have been told about glitches in the system whereby the CMS has not been able to locate parents on the HMRC system, despite parents having used the system in the past. There have been failures after failures, and families are suffering and paying the price for ministerial incompetence.

Many of my constituents adversely affected by the management of the CMS want to do the right thing and they should not be punished further. They also want to know what plans are in place to rectify the faults in the system that allow delays in single parents updating their financial information and in reassessment so that they can begin receiving payments, which provides a lifeline for them. They also want to know what support is planned for families who are expecting reduced payments because of a loss of job and livelihood. My single-parent constituents deserve better at a time like this, but it seems that with this Government the families simply come last. The process of child maintenance can already be distressing, so let us make things easier, not harder, for these families, who are already feeling the pinch from this relentless pandemic.

4.26 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) on securing today's debate, and I was happy to support her application. It is clear from Members' contributions so far that we all deal with a number of constituents' cases regarding child maintenance payments. In just a year as an MP, I have dealt with several, so I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss the functioning of the CMS in Parliament today.

It is particularly appropriate to recognise the pressures that have resulted from coronavirus. There are pressures on the hard-working CMS staff, to whom I pay tribute. Like so many of us around the country, they will have had to get used to new ways of working. There are also pressures on parents in receipt of child maintenance, mostly one-parent families, as the economic impact of the pandemic threatens the livelihoods of many. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation's excellent "UK Poverty 2020/21" report, published last week, makes that clear. Even before covid, there were huge pressures on one-parent families. They had the highest in-work poverty rate and they are also one of the groups who are most likely to have been especially impacted by covid-19. Single parents are predominantly women and are more likely to work in the sectors hardest hit by covid. They are more reliant on local jobs and are more likely to have struggled with childcare during lockdown. Four in five people in one-parent families are in receipt of income-related benefits.

I mentioned constituency cases and I want to highlight one in particular. This constituent contacted me right at the start of my time as an MP, almost exactly a year ago, and her case is shocking. Her former husband had evaded making any financial contribution to help her raise her two sons over an 18-year period and she was owed almost £30,000 of unpaid child maintenance. I am not intending to go into a blow-by-blow account of her dealings with the CMS in the past year. Thankfully, the debt has now been paid, and I am very grateful to Baroness Stedman-Scott for meeting me twice in the autumn to try to resolve the case. However, a few things stood out to me, and to my constituent, throughout this process that I wanted to draw attention to.

The first was the sense of drift. I went to the CMS on several occasions asking what its next steps were and responses were forthcoming only after some chasing—my constituent had a similar experience. Months seemed to pass where very little progress was made, and just when we thought that the whole thing had been resolved it turned out that the old liability orders issued against her ex-husband had been lost in the transfer from the Child Support Agency to the CMS. In fairness, I should say that the CMS is replacing a discredited system; that, as I mentioned, coronavirus will have played a part, especially in the spring; and that since the autumn engagement has been good. But for my constituent, these delays have been incredibly frustrating. She told me:

> "Any correspondence that I have had with Child Maintenance has been met with the same poor failures in service. Despite all of my efforts there appears to be a distinct lack of accountability to take positive action on my case."

The second thing that struck me was the bureaucratic hoops that my constituent had to jump through in order for the money to be recovered. Her case had recently been transferred from the old CSA and, as a result, the CMS had in effect to start from scratch on trying to recover the money, even though it had been through the court order process previously. That meant more hoops to jump through, including two occasions when her ex-partner had the ability to launch a review of a decision that had been made by the CMS, which of course he did. All these served to do was to delay and frustrate the recovery of money that was already 18 years overdue. I understand why those safeguards are in place, but it is incredibly frustrating. My constituent felt that the CMS was being more responsive to her ex-partner than to her.

Thirdly, there is the fact that my constituent had to come to me for this to be unblocked. She was getting nowhere on her own. When I escalated the case, I was able to speak to the Minister and to the case manager, and that was a great help, but as is so often the case, as I have learned over the last year, it should not have to be that way. MPs are who people go to when they have exhausted every other option. It should not have to take significant and sustained engagement from me and my casework team to resolve issues. We have to start designing processes that work for people. The tragedy is that my constituent's children are now adults. They have grown up, and they have missed out on the support they needed at the time they needed it.

4.30 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) [V]: I congratulate the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) on setting the scene so well. It is a pleasure to see the Minister back in his place. I look forward very much to his response. He never lets us down—so there is no pressure on him to give us the answers that we need! I thank him so much.

The Child Maintenance Service is an extremely important service to the lives of so many children. It is always desirable for splits to be amicable and for parents to be

[Jim Shannon]

able to make decisions on the division of time and finances. That is always the goal, but unfortunately it is not always reached. Too many times in my office, I see parents at the end of themselves due to a relationship breakdown, struggling financially while they await the involvement of the CMS to help resolve their dispute.

As other Members have done, I thank my local CMS team, who have worked with my office. They do their utmost to be open and transparent, and to get back to us urgently. Often, their hands are tied, because they are waiting for employers or accountants to come back to them. The process is long and difficult. Time prevents me from discussing today the many examples my office has seen of people who we would suggest are deliberately avoiding making payments. I think the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) said that there was somewhere special for them; I cannot say, "That would be right," but we do need them to respond quickly.

Add in the delays that the pandemic has introduced, with civil servants waiting for months to get the appropriate equipment, and cases being put on hold. Although this is understandable, as all our offices have had difficulties, it does not make the situation acceptable. For the parent left at home alone, holding the baby and waiting for financial help—with no way of increasing tax credits, which are reviewed annually—the stress of lockdown has been exacerbated by the lack of financial and emotional support. It is clear that the CMS system needs drastically to alter so that it can help in the short term, not just the long term.

Some parents have used the impact of furlough on wages as a reason to reassess their outgoings and cut payments for the maintenance of their children, and delays in the system have been made worse by the lack of equipment and staff. Press articles have told people to pay child maintenance as usual, and that amounts could be recalculated. Although this is understandable if a hairdresser or leisure centre worker has been precluded from working, the child still needs the same money to live. The Government could and should have made up the difference in the interim, and then worked out the longer-term repayments. That might be one thing that we learn from the process.

The number of food bank vouchers issued through my office has more than doubled, and many single parents have been devastated by the loss of payments, which were not made up for by tax credits or universal credit. We have to learn constructive lessons, so that we can address the essential issue of how we support children in poverty—those who need extra attention. They may be in worse-for-wear clothes or show other small signals of struggles, and yet have a parent who does their very best.

We have heard concerns expressed that these children do not have laptops at home. I am thankful to the Education Minister at home, who ensured that schools were able to take in children who do not have access to reliable internet or equipment. But we need to do more, and perhaps it would go a long way if all the Government Departments worked in tandem.

My heart is for children. The more I speak to those who work with them, the more I understand that there are so many homes with so many more difficulties in these worst of times. We in this place have not made the decisions that would have eased things for many. Getting it right through the CMS relieves financial and emotional pressures in the home. We must find a way of altering the CMS process to help people who are struggling, so that they can provide a steady life for their beloved child. We are in unprecedented times, and we now see the problems in the system and should learn from them. Let us take steps to rectify those problems, knowing that when we do, we will have a positive impact on the home lives and experiences of children, who need this more than ever.

4.34 pm

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP) [V]: I must first pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), not just for securing this debate, but for the tenacity she has shown in sticking with this issue for many years. I hope, however, that the strength of the arguments we have heard from colleagues across the House today will inspire the Government to take action. As the Minister has heard today, the SNP is calling for a minimum maintenance payment and a root-and-branch review of the Child Maintenance Service. I will not repeat the detail of the arguments, but I support them wholeheartedly and I hope he will listen.

One of my biggest concerns is that abusive ex-partners have effectively been given an even greater helping hand during the pandemic—inadvertently, of course, but when organisations such as Scottish Women's Aid, Gingerbread and Mumsnet, to name just a few, tell the Government this is happening, and they do nothing when they could do something, at some stage it stops being inadvertent.

A survey by Gingerbread and Mumsnet in August found that 86% of lone parents say the Child Maintenance Service has allowed their ex-partner to financially control or abuse them, post separation. Abusive partners are using the CMS as a weapon. Survivors and charities say that that has intensified during lockdown. This is deliberate domestic abuse. Given that the Government have been warned for months about that intensification, they and the CMS are responsible for its failure on enforcement. It is deliberate domestic abuse, and what is the Child Maintenance Service doing? Nothing—nothing but assisting the abuse.

Someone recently told me that her ex-partner takes his kids to all the burger, chicken and pizza places that most kids love. He also buys them all the sweets and fizzy drinks they want, and they come home saying, "Daddy said you should take us to nice places. Why don't you, mum?" This is a mother who barely eats at times because he withholds the money—a mother who then has to cope with the impact of the sugar rush on her kids while trying to home-educate them during lockdown, with the guilt she feels for apparently not making her children happy, and with the misery of knowing that, despite finally managing to get away from him, he still has a hold on her. It has become so much worse during the pandemic because, as we have heard, the CMS is operating with a skeleton crew. It is despicable behaviour. I have no doubt that we all agree on that, but the Minister and the Government can do something about it.

The Scottish Parliament's Equalities and Human Rights Committee recently held an inquiry on the pandemic. Scottish Women's Aid reported that abusers are using

the pandemic to increase their control of women's movements; they are keeping them isolated, threatening to expose them to the virus, or discouraging them from seeking help by telling them that CMS services are not operating. We are supposed to be helping people in those circumstances. People need to know that the services are operating—that they and their children are a priority.

The Government must make that point loud and clear, but they cannot do that until they are sure that what they are saying is correct. The Department for Work and Pensions website talks of the need to focus on essential services and says that will impact services such as the CMS. I do not disagree with focusing, but is the CMS really classed as a non-essential service? We only have to ask the parents who use the CMS whether the Government have got it right to know the answer.

Gingerbread and Mumsnet did that in their survey of August last year. Just 11% of parents described their experience of using the CMS as positive, and a shocking 72% said that using the service had made their mental health and wellbeing worse. That is because the CMS, when it is working properly, is an essential service. Levels of dissatisfaction are so high that four parents, backed by Gingerbread, Mumsnet and the Good Law Project, have been forced to seek a judicial review of the service's persistent failure to collect payments from absent parents. There is so much wrong with the CMS—not the staff, but the system—with or without a pandemic. We need that full review.

We know that the impact of covid-19 has been greatest on particular groups of people, single parents among them. Single parents are more likely to be women, working in a low-wage sector, working part time and facing huge restrictions because of transport and childcare. It was a choice to run the Child Maintenance Service on a skeleton staff last year, and there are still full-time employees of the service redeployed by the DWP. Why choose to make things more difficult for a group of people already facing more difficulties than most?

Another choice is to put the CMS right. Let us not forget that it was not right before the pandemic, which is why we are calling for a full review. During the pandemic, any measures that the Government take around covid restrictions or changes of service are supposed not to discriminate against any particular group, but in this case, as domestic abuse is gender-based and financial abuse is part of that, they are discriminatory. The Government have put money and extra staffing into other services, but why take money and staff away from this one?

I am hoping from some humility from the Government today. I welcome what the Minister said about the relevant Minister meeting us to look at individual cases, but the problems are systemic. If a politician holds their hands up and says, "We got it wrong, but we are ready to put it right," nobody can argue with that. I can say on behalf of the SNP that if the Government are willing to put it right and have a root-and-branch review, we will support them.

4.40 pm

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab) [V]: This has been a welcome, albeit brief, opportunity to consider an essential service, and I thank the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) for securing it. We have heard some important contributions, all of which stressed two critical things: first, our thanks to the staff who have continued to work hard during these challenging months to keep the show on the road; and, secondly, the critical, real-world experience of parents who are looking after their children in very difficult circumstances and on very low incomes.

We know only too well that the pandemic has had an impact on the delivery of a whole range of public services. Child maintenance is easily forgotten, but it is very important that we understand the scale of the impact and learn lessons from the experience of the past year, particularly—hon. Members reinforced this point—in the light of the predicted rise in unemployment, and the wider economic fallout from the pandemic, which will inevitably disrupt maintenance arrangements for some time to come.

The Child Maintenance Service manages more than half a million arrangements for child support, affecting three quarters of a million children. To underline the importance of that, I am happy to quote the words of the Minister in the other place, Baroness Stedman-Scott:

> "It's a truth not well known that the work of the Child Maintenance Service lifts hundreds of thousands of children out of poverty by making sure payments are made and received."

Indeed, it is estimated that one in five single-parent families on benefits is lifted out of poverty by maintenance payments. That means that the redeployment of CMS staff to the processing of universal credit claims should not be seen as simply moving people from back-office functions to frontline services. I am sure the Minister will agree that ensuring that those obligations are met, and that parents who care receive the support to which they are entitled, is not a service that can be paused without immediate consequences for family incomes, especially at a time when, in thousands of cases, maintenance obligations are being impacted by sudden changes of circumstances.

The point has been well made by Gingerbread. The decision to run a skeleton service during the initial outbreak of covid-19 led to the CMS allowing non-resident parents to reduce or withdraw their financial obligations to their children without any evidence. I therefore ask the Minister what assessment the Department has made of the impact of the pandemic on maintenance entitlements, and of the risk of paying parents evading their responsibilities due to the changes in evidence requirements.

This is a matter of priorities and also of resilience. Yes, the pandemic has required us to reprioritise in all sorts of ways, but the impact on services also depends on how resilient they were in the first place. If we cut services to the bone, we will be faced with even harder choices when the unexpected strikes. Unfortunately, the evidence suggests that the CMS was already struggling to carry out its functions before the pandemic.

According to the National Audit Office, in 2011-12 the Department for Work and Pensions employed 100,250 people on a full-time equivalent basis. By the time the pandemic struck, the Government had cut DWP staff numbers by 28% to 72,186. The Government now find themselves scrambling to reverse the cuts to staff numbers that they made over the past 10 years, with 7,000 new recruits between April and August and a further 17,000 planned by March.

[Ms Karen Buck]

Child maintenance was not spared when the Government were cutting staff numbers. According to the Department's workforce management statistics, in 2010-11 there were 8,246 full-time equivalent staff employed in child maintenance and enforcement. In February 2020, there were just 4,745. Nearly a third of those staff were then redeployed to manage the surge in universal credit claims. So by the time the pandemic struck the CMS was already trying to fulfil its mission with little more than half the staff complement that was in place 10 years earlier.

How well was the CMS performing? For collect and pay arrangements, despite the range of collection and enforcement powers available, compliance was only 68%, and the bar for compliance in the official statistics seems to be set pretty low, defined as paying some child maintenance over the previous three months. I recognise that the performance data show improvements in compliance since 2015, but these are improvements on a very poor baseline. Meanwhile, for direct pay arrangements, more than two thirds of caseload compliance is not even monitored by the Department. Research commissioned in 2016 showed that just under half of caring parents had an effective arrangement after three months, and this rose to only 53% after 13 months.

Ironically, the pandemic has led to an increase in compliance with collect and pay arrangements, but only because so many paying parents are now on benefits, making it easier for the CMS to deduct payment. It is striking and sobering to note that the percentage of collect and pay arrangements where the paying partner is on benefits rose from 21% to 40% from the start of the pandemic to September 2020.

I fully recognise that some of the impact of the pandemic has been unavoidable. It was inevitable that much enforcement activity would have to be paused given that courts were closed, but the pandemic does not explain why DWP staffing levels had been cut so much over the previous 10 years or why the performance of the CMS has for so long left much to be desired. Decisions taken years earlier made managing the impact of the pandemic harder than it needed to be both for the Department and for parents bringing up and looking after their children.

4.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): I congratulate the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) on securing this important Backbench Business Committee debate and thank all colleagues who have participated. I repeat the point I made earlier that the Minister concerned, Baroness Stedman-Scott, will meet colleagues and raise individual cases, and I assure the hon. Lady that there will be a written response to all matters that I am unable to deal with in the limited time available for my responses today.

We know that the vast majority of separated parents, whether receiving parents or paying parents, take their responsibilities extremely seriously. Our aim is to help parents, and we are sensitive to the needs of both parties: the CMS is designed for the needs of both parties and designed to promote collaboration between parents, and it offers a statutory scheme where that is not possible. We do this fundamentally because the innocent parties in all of this are the children.

I do not have children myself, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I suffered the loss of my children last year, and I know that any issue involving our children is an emotional and distressing and personal process, and I promise this House that the Government and all DWP staff are absolutely trying to handle this very, very difficult process in the most sensitive way possible.

We believe the CMS made a dramatic improvement in the immediate pre-covid period and the statistics support that. Last year, in 2019-20, over £1 billion was arranged through the direct pay and the collect and pay services. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) highlighted, in the last seven years the percentage of CMS cases where no maintenance is being paid has halved. CMS investigators have the power to deduct directly from earnings and to seize funds owed in child maintenance payments where requests for payments are consistently refused, and between 2018 and 2020 the compliance rate of parents on the CMS collect and pay service has increased by 8%.

But of course covid has had a significant impact. In March last year, the Department, along with much of Government, had to respond to an unprecedented situation; that meant working quickly to prioritise services and support for those who would be impacted by the particulars of the pandemic. As a result, we mobilised our frontline welfare system like never before with an injection of more than £7 billion into our welfare safety net and over 3 million more people claiming support through universal credit. To assist that, 1,500 CMS staff were redeployed to support the increase in the universal credit workload. I wish to put on record my thanks and the thanks of the Secretary of State to all the staff in the CMS and across the DWP who have worked so hard and so flexibly during the pandemic itself.

Despite our focus on protecting those most in need and on tackling the huge challenges over the past year, the principle that parents should be responsible for their children remains. Nobody should have exploited this crisis as a way not to fulfil their obligations to their children. I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes), the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, that there is a special place for those who game the system and put their children's welfare at risk.

On the issue of avoidance, I want to address the particular point that, as with all calculation decisions, clients can request a mandatory reconsideration, or appeal the decision. In the CMS, we have opened up our definition of income to deal with almost all additional sources of gross income captured by self-assessment. They include income from property, savings, investments and, indeed, dividends and other miscellaneous income. Where a person's income appears suspicious in any way, the case can be referred to the financial investigations unit. I should add that, in respect of enforcement, like other Government services, the CMS introduced temporary changes at the start of the pandemic—for example, directing customers to use its online services in the first instance, which were available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Understandably, application processing times were impacted, and because the courts were closed,

that meant that liability orders and sanctions work had to pause. Nevertheless, in the quarter to June 2020, compliance on the collect and pay service was at 74%, with £41.7 million paid. Throughout this pandemic, as colleagues have maintained very fairly, the Minister responsible for the CMS, Baroness Stedman-Scott, and her officials have regularly met not only parliamentary colleagues, but key stakeholders such as Gingerbread and Families Need Fathers, to understand both the ongoing problems and also the needs of the separated families.

The issue of domestic abuse was raised. In the circumstances that prevailed during the periods of lockdown it was, and it remains, vital to ensure that the CMS supports victims of domestic abuse in whatever way that manifests itself.

I want to turn now to the recovery of the CMS post July 2020. As the Government's response to the pandemic has adapted, so the CMS has been able to reinstate its core services. For example, by the end of September, nearly 1,150 CMS staff had returned from the redeployment across the Department. The CMS has also stepped up efforts to pursue dedications and on the recovery and enforcement of outstanding arrears by reviewing all non-paying cases to make sure that each one is up to date, with outstanding changes, actions and arrears and balances being corrected.

On enforcement, the CMS has continued to enforce payments where possible throughout the pandemic in order to support children and is working to increase enforcement activity back to pre-crisis levels where possible. At the end of September last year, 43,000 paying parents on the collect and pay service had a deduction from earnings order in force, with £25.7 million being collected from those paying parents during the period 1 July to 30 September 2020. In the quarter to September 2020, the compliance rate on collect and pay was 72%, and £41.1 million was paid. In addition, £201.8 million was due to be paid through direct pay.

It is right to say that liability orders require the most court participation and remain the most difficult measure to restart while social distancing requirements remain in place. However, we are working with Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service and the Ministry of Justice with regard to court hearings, and that work continues apace. As of 2021, the CMS has pretty much restored its full service and remains committed to making sure that everyone pays or receives the right amount of child maintenance. We continue to focus efforts on tackling non-payment of child maintenance and backdated income changes. New digital services have been introduced, and these are available 24/7 and allow greater flexibility for parents to contact the CMS. Ensuring that those payments are made to those who are owed them is the binding principle that drives forward the Child Maintenance Service. The difference it can make to a child's life chances demonstrates the critical importance of paying child maintenance, and the Child Maintenance Service will not hesitate to use robust enforcement measures where someone consistently refuses to meet their obligations.

I thank all colleagues for their participation in this important debate. As usual, the praise of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is something that is rarely obtained, but always enjoyed. I assure the House that DWP Ministers and the Secretary of State, who is in the Chamber today, look forward to us continuing to work together to address the needs of separated parents and to produce better outcomes for children, because, after all, the children are what this is all about.

4.56 pm

Marion Fellows [V]: I thank the Minister, especially for what he said at the end. I do not think any of us, whether or not we have taken part in this debate, does not believe that children are what matter in all of this. I can assure him that my office has already emailed Baroness Stedman-Scott, and we hope to continue a dialogue to improve the service in relation to those parents who do not keep up their obligations and those who refuse to take on board that when they have a child, that child is their responsibility—in my view, almost for life.

I thank all Members who have taken part in this debate for the wide range of topics that they brought to bear in the Chamber today. It is important for me and for everyone else that this debate continues to the betterment of children and their resident parents—to make their lives better, whether we are in a pandemic or not.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the operation of the Child Maintenance Service during the covid-19 outbreak.

Extradition Act 2003

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Tom Pursglove.)*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Before I call the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), I remind all hon. Members that the judgment of a court earlier this month in the case of Julian Assange is the subject of an appeal, so matters considered in that case are sub judice and should not be referred to. The matter of criminal charges against Anne Sacoolas in connection with the death of Harry Dunn is also sub judice. I sincerely thank the right hon. Member for his courtesy in consulting in advance of this debate, and I remind any other Member who should seek to participate in this debate to be equally mindful of the sub judice resolution and matters that are still before the courts.

4.58 pm

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): Before I enter into the subject, let me say that it was amusing to see the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) rush to his place. He is a friend, but he is also standing in for a great friend of mine, my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire), who is an old friend and old protégé of mine. As we all know, he is away ill, and I take this opportunity to wish him the best of luck in his treatment and a rapid return to the Chamber.

As you said, Madam Deputy Speaker, I have consulted with the Clerks, and what I have to say will skirt very carefully around the sub judice rules.

Since we agreed the UK-US extradition treaty in 2003, it has been abundantly clear that the British Government of the day struck a truly dreadful deal. Asymmetric, ineffective and fundamentally unfair on British citizens, it is a terrible flaw in our own justice system. The previous Labour Administration approached the treaty as though their duty was first and foremost to support the wishes of our American friends, not to safeguard the rights of UK citizens.

5 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Tom Pursglove.)*

Mr Davis: Perhaps that was understandable in the context of the terrorism sweeping the world at that time, but friends must be honest with each other, and now we must say, "Enough is enough."

The 2003 treaty paved the way for British citizens to be handed over to the US authorities, with minimal safeguards against injustice. Numerous examples down the years have shown this, from the NatWest Three to Christopher Tappin. The recent decision to block the extradition of Mr Assange did not add to the list. However, the judgment earlier this month was a human rather than a legal victory. Although we cannot, of course, discuss the substance of the Assange judgment here today, the House must note the worrying development more generally in our extradition arrangements—extradition for political offences. It stems from an erroneous interpretation of Parliament's intention in 2003. This must now be clarified.

Article 4 of the UK-US extradition treaty provides that extradition will not be granted for political offences. In the UK, the treaty was implemented in the Extradition Act 2003. It has been claimed that, because the Act does not specifically refer to political offences, Parliament explicitly took the decision to remove the bar when passing the Act in 2003. That is not the case—Parliament had no such intention. Had it intended such a massive deviation from our centuries-long tradition of providing asylum, it would have been explicit.

When the Extradition Bill was debated in the Commons, Members raised concerns about extraditions in relation to political offences. In responding to those concerns, Minister Bob Ainsworth gave a clear and unequivocal answer:

"The Bill will ensure that no one can be extradited where the request is politically motivated".—[*Official Report*, 9 December 2002; Vol. 396, c. 115.]

The Government today have also recognised that. In October 2019, the Home Office confirmed that such a bar was implicit in UK law and that it would be down to judges, on a case-by-case basis, to decide whether to apply the bar. However, recent cases before the courts have shown that an implicit bar is not enough. We must have clarity on this issue. It is vital that our extradition arrangements have appropriate protection for political offences, not least because political asylum seekers may seek the protection of British justice in the future.

But that is not all. When the 2003 extradition treaty was introduced, it was sold on the basis—I remember this because I was the shadow Home Secretary—that it would be used principally for paedophiles, murderers and terrorists. But the people we are extraditing to the US today are, mostly, white-collar businessmen who pose no physical danger to United Kingdom or US citizens. Between 2007 and 2019, the UK surrendered 135 individuals to the US, 99 of them for non-violent offences. Instead of seeking justice against dangerous criminals, the United States is seeking to be judge, jury and executioner for global commercial deals.

In 2012, the Select Committee on Home Affairs said that the US

"has the power to reach out around the world and—provided there is a very, very tenuous connection with the US—it generally has the power to prosecute."

That has been shown in case after case, including those of Ian Norris the former head of Morgan Crucible, the NatWest Three, Christopher Tappin and numerous others. Those cases all have common themes: they are all British citizens; the alleged crimes all took place on British soil; and the UK authorities did not see them as having a case to answer, but the UK system failed to protect them and the US authorities ultimately got their way.

Of course, people must be brought to justice when they break the law, but the problem at the heart of this extradition process is that it is fundamentally asymmetric and unbalanced in favour of the United States. This lopsided treaty allows US citizens to evade justice, while exposing UK citizens to miscarriages of justice.

In a 2011 report on our extradition arrangements, Lord Justice Scott Baker concluded that we did not need to change the rules to ensure that London-based offences are dealt with here in the UK. He was wrong. He failed to give enough weight to the US ambition to

extend its extraterritorial jurisdiction of commercial crimes. He also made no allowance for the incredibly one-sided nature of prosecution and trial of foreign suspects in the US justice system. An American citizen facing extradition to the UK can challenge it in a US court on the basis that there is no "probable cause", but a UK citizen facing extradition has no right to a reasonable grounds hearing. That is what the Joint Committee on Human Rights called in 2011 a

"lack of reciprocity in the Treaty"

when it called for reform of that treaty.

In the case of political offences, the treaty allows a US Executive to determine what is and is not a political offence. In the UK, we rightly leave this to the courts. What is more, the US Secretary of State has far greater discretion to refuse an extradition than our Home Secretary. The British Extradition Act states:

"The Secretary of State must issue a certificate"

for extradition. The equivalent US code states:

"The Secretary of State may order the person....to be tried".

Such a seemingly minor change in language has a dramatic effect. With the US being a larger country, and with the UK being closer to the frontline on terrorism, we would expect the numbers being extradited from the United States to the UK to be greater than those going in the opposite direction. The reverse applies. The US has surrendered only 58 individuals to the United Kingdom since 2007, with only 11 of them American citizens, while 135 have gone the other way.

There is no starker example of the inequity and imbalance than the case that you mentioned, Madam Deputy Speaker, of Anne Sacoolas and the death of Harry Dunn. In that case, the US Secretary of State used the discretion afforded only to the US under the treaty to prevent extradition. The Prime Minister has recognised this imbalance. On 12 February last year, he said:

"I do think that elements of that relationship are unbalanced, and it is certainly worth looking at"—[*Official Report*, 12 February 2020; Vol. 671, c. 846.]—

yet nearly a year on, we remain in the same position.

The courts may be starting to recognise the imbalance. In the wake of the decision to block Gary McKinnon's extradition, UK courts were given the power to bar extradition on forum grounds so that crimes committed primarily in the UK against UK citizens could be tried in this country. The absence of the forum bar in the 2003 Act highlighted just how cavalier the Blair Administration were with the rights of British citizens. The safeguard had existed previously in the 1957 European convention on extradition, and citizens almost universally elsewhere in Europe could count on its protection.

Since 2018, in the cases of Lauri Love, Stuart Scott, Robert McDaid and Christopher Taylor, the courts have used this bar in a partial attempt to even up our extradition arrangements. This asymmetry is not an inevitable outcome of being an ally of the US. It is a policy choice. Countries such as France and Germany refuse to allow their citizens to be extradited and for good reason.

David Bermingham, one of the NatWest Three, described to the House of Lords how he and his co-defendants were extradited to Texas and

"put in…hand chains, foot chains"—

restraining "belts and everything else", and then "strip-searched". This is designed not only to intimidate the accused, but to score a PR victory for American prosecutors. Those extradited to the US face this treatment whenever they are dragged into and out of court in front of the television cameras and the paparazzi. All this comes at the expense of the presumption of innocence.

It is often the case that once extradited to America, the accused is refused bail. This is on the basis that they are a flight risk. The result is that they are thrown in a cell, often shared with a fellow inmate—possibly a hardened criminal—and their access to legal papers is massively restricted. Their ability to contribute meaningfully to their defence is totally handicapped. This is particularly damaging in all those white-collar cases, where the relevant evidence can stretch to millions of pages and the prosecution face no requirement to tell defendants which pieces of evidence they intend to rely on.

Defendants then face enormous pressure from the US authorities to agree a plea bargain. They are told that if they refuse a deal, they will be denied bail and face decades in a maximum-security prison, but if they plead guilty, they will receive a much lighter sentence in an open prison. They are also reminded of the huge financial cost in America of protracted and complex trials, often running into the millions or tens of millions. It takes a brave person to turn down the easy route.

David Bermingham has described how he had to negotiate his punishment before he had even settled on the crime he would be pleading guilty to. That is repeated across the US legal system, where a massive majority of cases are settled by a plea bargain—I think the number is 97%. Take the case of Jamie Olis, an employee of a US energy firm who stood accused of fraud. He refused a plea bargain and protested his innocence in court. He was handed a 24-year sentence. His boss at the firm—presumably more responsible—took the plea bargain route and co-operated with the Government. He was sentenced to just 15 months; 15 months for the boss and 24 years for the subordinate.

Plea bargains are just one of the tools used by US prosecutors to stack the deck against defendants. They also deliberately use the threat of prosecution to disable the defence's witnesses. Witnesses willing to co-operate with the prosecution are given immunity, while witnesses who refuse to do so find themselves threatened with prosecution. For cases where the alleged crime is in Britain, no British defence witness is going to travel to a court in the US and risk being charged on arrival and never coming back. What is more, prosecutors label these witnesses as co-conspirators, which handicaps the defence's ability but maximises the prosecution's ability to use their evidence. These tactics are such a serious issue that in one American case—that of Mohammad Dolah—the judge described it as

"a fundamental unfairness that might well amount to a denial of due process."

It is not just the prosecution inside the courtroom stacking the deck against the defendant. The first amendment to the American constitution allows the American media to print and broadcast sometimes frenzied coverage of trials, which inevitably prejudices their outcome. In effect, high-profile defendants in the US face trial by media, as well as trial by jury. That has been laid bare in a string of cases, most famously that of O. J. Simpson, but perhaps most perniciously in the case

[Mr David Davis]

of the Central Park Five, which is not so well known here but is well known in the United States. That case led to a miscarriage of justice for 13 years—that person was in jail for 13 years, and he was eventually exonerated.

Let us compare that with the UK. As you reminded me at the beginning of the debate, Madam Deputy Speaker, the Contempt of Court Act 1981 safeguards the presumption of innocence by preventing anything from being published that prejudices ongoing trials. Indeed, it is those protections that prevent me from discussing cases relevant to the debate that are sub judice. My speech today is, entirely properly, sharply constrained to avoid mention of half a dozen extant cases in the interest of not biasing justice. The US justice system as applied to foreign suspects is not normal justice as we understand it here in the United Kingdom.

My argument to the Minister—and I am not expecting a great reply today—is that we must rethink the entire relationship with the United States on extradition. We must navigate a constructive path forward for both countries based on arrangements that are balanced, fair and reciprocal. We should remember that we are friends, not enemies; allies, not rivals. This is particularly important as we seek to embark on a new trading relationship. In the next decade, our two countries will develop even closer commercial relationships. Businesses developed by brilliant British inventors and scientists will look to merge and co-operate with or sell to big American companies in the bigger American market. If the current extradition treaty stands, every one of them could face American extraterritorial legal actions and a legal system stacked against them. In the interests of both countries, that must change.

The Extradition Act not only touches the lives of renowned political actors and international business executives; it also impacts families such as Harry Dunn's. If the American Government insist on trying to exercise extraterritorial jurisdiction in their interest, perhaps we should mimic Israel and refuse to extradite British citizens for anything other than serious crimes of violence and terrorism. We must give our citizens the protection, certainty and justice that they deserve and that our judicial system has a proud history of upholding.

5.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Chris Philp): As my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) said, I am here deputising for the Minister for Security, my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire), who is awaiting treatment. I am sure the whole House will want to send him their warmest wishes for a speedy recovery and return to his duties at the Home Office, his duties in the House and his duties at this Dispatch Box, where he would unquestionably do a far better job than me. I wish him a rapid recovery and a rapid return.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing this debate on extradition. It is a topic he has consistently raised in this House over a period of time. It has been part of his long-standing record as a champion of civil liberties in a whole range of areas. It is a great privilege to be here this evening responding to his speech.

I would start by saying that extradition arrangements are a vital part of the Government's toolkit in combating crime. It clearly serves the interests of justice to be able to bring back to the United Kingdom people who have committed offences here, where we want to prosecute them, and similarly, where people in the UK have committed offences elsewhere, it is reasonable for them to face justice in the countries that legitimately want them. So I think the principles of reciprocal extradition treaties are an important part of our justice system.

In recent years, in relation to our extradition arrangements with the US, we have successfully managed to bring back into the UK under that agreement people who have committed very serious offences to stand trial here for those offences, including rape, murder, manslaughter and many child sexual offences. Clearly, it serves the interests of justice and public safety that those people are subject to prosecution.

It is worth mentioning that the Extradition Act 2003, the subject of this evening's debate, is organised geographically in two parts. Part 1 provides arrangements for European Union countries and part 2 applies to all other countries where we have formal arrangements through the European convention on extradition, the Commonwealth scheme or a bilateral treaty. Requests from any other country where we do not have formal extradition relations are dealt with on a case-by-case basis, and as my right hon. Friend has said, where the UK considers a request by another country to extradite one of our citizens, the standard looked at is reasonable suspicion. That is the threshold applied in deciding whether or not an extradition request is reasonable.

On numbers, it is worth pausing for a moment. On the part 1 extradition figures for the last financial year, 2019-20, EU countries requested 1,168 individuals who were physically present in the UK, of whom 689 were subsequently sent to one of those EU countries. Similarly, we wanted to get hold of 269 individuals who were somewhere in the EU, of whom 231 were brought into the UK.

The reason I mention those figures is by way of comparison with the US figures that my right hon. Friend mentioned. First, the numbers in relation to EU countries in both directions are far higher; the numbers I mentioned, which were for just a one-year period, were far higher—by a multiple—than the US figures. There is also the ratio: in relation to EU countries, far more people—about three times more people—were taken from the UK into European countries than the other way around. That ratio is very similar to the ratio in relation to the US. So the ratio is broadly similar, whether it is the US or the EU. Therefore, I would not take that disparity in itself to indicate that there is a fundamental problem, unless we are going to argue there is a similar problem in relation to the EU, which I do not think anyone has so far suggested.

I would like to try to address some of the most fundamental points my right hon. Friend made. Essentially, his central allegation was that there is an imbalance—an asymmetry—in the arrangements, whereby it is easier and it is faster for the United States to extradite UK citizens, or people in the UK, than vice versa. I would like to take each of the points in turn that might be cited in support of the suggestion that there is an imbalance.

One of the first points that often come up is the evidential threshold: what standard or what threshold do we have to reach in order for an extradition request

to be granted? In the United Kingdom, as we have discussed already, broadly speaking, the test is of reasonable suspicion. For a request in the other direction, where the UK is requesting the extradition of somebody in the US, then the standard is what essentially amounts to probable cause. The question is whether those standards are equivalent—is reasonable suspicion equivalent or not to probable cause? That question was considered in 2011 by Sir Scott Baker, a retired senior judge, who concluded that both tests are based on reasonableness, both have to be supported by equivalent documentation and both represent the standard of proof applied by police officers in both jurisdictions, and that in substance the threshold represented by those two tests is broadly the same.

The House of Lords looked at the matter in 2014. The Select Committee on Extradition Law took evidence and concluded that, although the tests are in some elements different,

"whether this difference has any practical effect is debatable."

The Committee went on to say that the

"experience to date demonstrates that"

the argument that

"they are 'functionally' the same is persuasive."

So, both Sir Scott Baker and the House of Lords Select Committee gave the opinion that in essence the thresholds applied in the two jurisdictions are, broadly speaking, equivalent.

The second area in which one might seek a divergence between the arrangements is discretion, on which my right hon. Friend touched. He pointed out, quite correctly, that the US Secretary of State has a discretion to refuse an extradition request, whereas the Secretary of State here is under an obligation to grant one after the matter has been considered, if requested, by a court. We have seen a number of cases—including recent cases, one of which Madam Deputy Speaker referred to—in which the courts in the United Kingdom have refused an extradition request, so protection is provided by the courts. Moreover, there is a right of appeal, so if in the first instance the court grants an extradition request, there can be an appeal—in fact, there are probably two levels of appeal above the court of first instance. There is, then, substantial judicial intervention to protect the rights of UK citizens in the way that I have just described.

It is instructive to think about the numbers—how often our courts protect people in the UK who are subject to extradition versus how often the US Secretary of State exercises their unfettered discretion. The answer is starkly in favour of the United Kingdom: I am told that since the treaty was entered into, on 21 separate occasions, a few of which my right hon. Friend referred to—I am not sure if those 21 include the recent Assange case—the UK court has said that extradition may not occur. The courts have stopped extradition 21 times. Conversely, there has been only one occasion on which the US Secretary of State has exercised their discretion and declined one of our requests, and that is in respect of the Anne Sacoolas case, which we should not debate too much. That is the only occasion on which that discretion has been exercised. That gives us some sense that the matter is perhaps not as one-sided as is occasionally suggested.

There is a third argument, which my right hon. Friend advanced with his characteristic eloquence, passion and attention to detail: the question of whether crimes might be committed in the UK that have only a very tangential connection to the US but the US authorities can then reach into the UK and pluck out suspects who really have very little, if anything, to do with the United States. That is the substance of the suggestion.

My right hon. Friend referred to a 2012 Select Committee report that drew attention to such problems. It was partly in response to that Select Committee report, and in response to some of the cases in the first decade of this century to which he referred, that the 2003 Act was amended in October 2013, 10 years after it first came into force, and a new section 83A was introduced that gave the United Kingdom courts the ability to refuse extradition either when a substantial measure of the requested person's relevant activity was performed in the UK—that is, their offences were mostly UK offences—or when extradition would be contrary to the interests of justice. At the time, the US embassy was not terribly happy about those changes. I think that amendment—new section 83A, introduced in 2013—goes a long way to making sure that people whose offences are only very loosely connected to the US, and the substance of which were allegedly committed in the UK, are afforded quite a good measure of protection from extradition to the United States. That was a very important change that I think goes quite a long way towards protecting UK citizens.

The courts have used that power, and they have also used human rights law, as my right hon. Friend has said, in cases such as those of Gary McKinnon and Lauri Love. The courts have used it more recently as well, as Madam Deputy Speaker said, where the prospective defendant has successfully argued before our courts that their human rights would be infringed in some way if the extradition proceeded, and our courts here in the United Kingdom have afforded that protection. I think that is a very significant point in our debate.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): How does the Minister respond to the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) that an innocent person finding themselves on trial in the United States—our closest ally, as we all agree—would nevertheless be put under intolerable pressure to plead guilty, because if he gambles on proving his innocence and fails, he faces an enormous sentence, whereas if he confesses to a crime that he did not commit, he can get off with a few months in jail?

Chris Philp: The argument that my right hon. Friend advances is essentially that the US justice system is inherently not fit for purpose. Of course, the rules that he describes apply as much to US citizens as they do to anyone else. Although the practice of plea bargaining in the United States is not one that we have in this jurisdiction, I do not think I would agree with the general proposition that the US justice system is inherently unjust, and that it is so bad that we cannot allow anyone to be taken there from this jurisdiction because the system is so terrible that justice will not be done. I do not accept that characterisation.

Of course there are points of difference, as has been pointed out, but I do not think those points of difference are such that we should simply turn around and say, "We will have nothing to do with the United States at all." That is not a conclusion that I share or concur with, and therefore I do not think it is a basis on which we would want to discontinue all extradition relations.

Mr David Davis: I had not intended to interfere with the Minister's course, but since this point has been raised, I will say that the most fundamental thing underpinning all extradition arrangements—whether they are with America, Europe or whatever—is a presumption that the justice systems are reasonably equivalent. This is where the weakness comes in.

Take the case of Christopher Tappin, who was extradited. He was somewhere in his 60s—65, maybe—and he was threatened with a 30-year sentence if he did not confess to a crime that he did not believe he had committed. That is an intolerable difference, and it is not just criticised here. As the Minister quite rightly says, it is the subject of massive criticism in the United States, but they are stuck with it until they change it. It seems to me that when we think about the treaties, not just for America but for other areas, we should consider trying to guarantee equivalence of justice in delivery, as well as in principle.

Chris Philp: I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention. The test is not that the justice systems are identical; it is that they are just. I do not think I would accept the argument that the American system is fundamentally unjust. However, if there are particular circumstances of a case—perhaps the case he mentions would have met that test, had he advanced that defence—where a grave injustice is threatened, then the UK courts, on human rights grounds, which include the right to a fair trial, can be invoked and a UK judge, or an English judge, can be invited to prevent extradition. It was on grounds, as I understand it, very similar to those that the recent case involved the judge making precisely that finding, so if a miscarriage of justice is threatened, an application can be made to an English judge to prevent the extradition using arguments not unlike those my right hon. Friend has just advanced.

I fear we are approaching the witching hour and I should therefore draw my remarks to a conclusion. The Government will, of course, keep this area under careful and vigilant review, prompted as ever by my right hon. Friend, to whom I am extremely grateful for raising this important matter this evening.

Question put and agreed to.

5.29 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 21 January 2021

CABINET OFFICE

European Union (Future Relationship) Act 2020

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): The European Union (Future Relationship) Act received Royal Assent on 31 December 2020 and the trade and co-operation agreement is now enshrined in UK law, a historic moment in our nation's journey following the 2016 referendum.

The Government sought, in line with the Sewel convention, legislative consent from the devolved legislatures of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland for the future relationship Bill. The Scottish Parliament voted to withhold consent for the Bill. The Northern Ireland Assembly and the Welsh Parliament did not hold a vote on a legislative consent motion for the Bill. The Northern Ireland Assembly voted for a motion, with a Social Democratic Labour party amendment, that called for the Assembly to decline legislative consent. The Welsh Parliament voted in favour of a motion to "note" the Bill, regretting that it was not in a position to determine legislative consent.

The Government respect the devolution settlements and the Sewel convention, and are committed to working with the devolved Administrations on the implementation of the trade and co-operation agreement.

The convention holds that the UK Government will not normally legislate with regard to devolved matters without the consent of the devolved legislatures, but the circumstances were not normal. The UK and EU needed to exchange notification of completion of procedures and complete other legal necessities, such as the UK's passing of legislation, early on 31 December to enable provisional application. If the Bill had not received Royal Assent in time, we would have been unable to exchange our notification by the morning of 31 December, the agreement could not have been provisionally applied, and the transition period would therefore have ended without a future UK-EU agreement in force.

We recognise that the expedited timescale was challenging, although the Bill was debated and voted on in Parliament by elected Members from across the UK. Taking the Bill to Royal Assent without the consent of the devolved legislatures was a significant decision. It is not one that was taken lightly. The circumstances of EU exit and the imperative of implementing the 2016 referendum constituted circumstances that were not normal.

While negotiations with the EU are a reserved matter, the UK Government are committed to continue working closely with the devolved Administrations to ensure that our future relationship with the EU works in the interests of citizens and businesses across the whole of the UK—something we demonstrated when engaging with the devolved Administrations in good faith throughout the negotiations.

[HCWS730]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Decriminalisation of TV Licence Evasion: Consultation Response

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Oliver Dowden): Today, the Government published their response to the consultation on decriminalising TV licence evasion.

The consultation invited views on whether the Government should proceed with the decriminalisation of TV licence evasion by replacing the criminal sanction with an alternative civil enforcement scheme. It set out four criteria against which the issue of decriminalisation would be considered:

> whether an alternative enforcement scheme is fairer and more proportionate;
>
> the cost and difficulty to implement any alternative scheme;
>
> the potential impact on licence fee payers, particularly the most vulnerable and those with protected characteristics; and
>
> the overall impact on licence fee collection.

The consultation closed on 1 April 2020 after receiving 154,737 responses from individuals, campaign organisations and other stakeholders. A summary of the responses is included in today's publication.

After carefully considering the responses received, the Government remain concerned that a criminal sanction for TV licence evasion is increasingly disproportionate and unfair in a modern public service broadcasting system. The consultation responses showed that a significant number of people oppose the criminal sanction with some highlighting the considerable stress and anxiety it can cause for individuals, including for the most vulnerable in society, such as older people.

However, the Government recognise that changing the sanction for TV licence evasion would have wide-ranging impacts for licence fee payers, including the potential for significantly higher fines and costs for individuals who evade the licence fee requirement under a civil regime. The consultation also highlighted significant impacts in terms of both the cost and implementation—particularly as the current system is very efficiently handled in the magistrates court—and challenges posed to the ongoing collection of the licence fee. The Government remain determined that any future change to the TV licence sanction or enforcement scheme should not be seen as an invitation to evade the TV licence requirement, nor should it privilege the rule-breaking minority over the rule-abiding majority.

The Government's consultation response, which we publish today, therefore sets out that the issue of decriminalisation will remain under active consideration while more work is undertaken to understand the impact of alternative enforcement schemes.

In particular, a future decision on decriminalising TV licence evasion would benefit from consideration in the context of wider reform to the BBC. The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has a roadmap for reform of the BBC and this provides critical context for any future decision on decriminalisation.

The Government will therefore take forward these considerations in the broader context of the next licence fee settlement, which will set the level of the licence fee

for a period of at least five years from 2022, and where negotiations have recently formally begun.

A copy of the consultation response will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

The attachment can be viewed online at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2021-01-21/HCWS732/.

[HCWS732]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Mental Health In-patient Deaths in Essex: Independent Inquiry

The Minister for Patient Safety, Suicide Prevention and Mental Health (Ms Nadine Dorries): The Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman (PHSO) published his report "Missed opportunities: What lessons can be learned from failings at the North Essex Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust" on 11 June 2019 which found that there were a series of significant failings in the care and treatment of two vulnerable young men who died shortly after being admitted to North Essex Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust. I have previously announced my commitment to an inquiry into these tragic events.

Today, I am announcing the establishment of a non-statutory, independent inquiry into the circumstances of mental health in-patient deaths at the former North Essex Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust, the former South Essex Partnership University Trust and the Essex Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust, which took over responsibility for mental health services in Essex from 2017. This will cover the period from 1 January 2000 to 31 December 2020.

In announcing this inquiry, I am mindful of the current, extraordinary demands on the NHS as it responds to the worst pandemic in living memory. The Essex Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust was one of the first to declare a major incident and the inquiry will schedule its work in a way that is sensitive to these pressures.

I have also listened carefully to the arguments proposing a more formal, statutory inquiry into these events. I share the desire for a robust and independent process that will get to the truth and deliver the necessary learning. I remain convinced that a non-statutory, independent inquiry is the best way to do this and identify the necessary improvements in the timeliest way.

I have asked the distinguished psychiatrist Dr Geraldine Strathdee CBE to chair the inquiry and am delighted that she has agreed to take on this important role. Dr Strathdee worked for many years as a consultant psychiatrist in the NHS. She brings a wealth of experience in mental health policy, regulation and clinical management and is a co-founder of the Zero Suicides Alliance. Dr Strathdee is a person of the utmost integrity and I will expect her to conduct this inquiry without fear or favour. In order to ensure her independence, she will step down from her current role as a national professional adviser at the Care Quality Commission when her term ends in March of this year.

The chair will be supported by expert advisers, including a legal adviser.

The inquiry will consider issues including:

the key factors that led to the deaths of individual patients, whether issues of omission or commission;

aspects of culture and governance that inhibited the trust(s)' ability to learn and take action following any breaches of safety;

the quality of any previous investigations by the trust(s), the conclusions and recommendations of those investigations and the subsequent actions;

the response of the wider system to these events and the actions taken by the trust(s) in response to investigations or reviews conducted by any other body; and

the further lessons for the Essex Partnership University Foundation NHS Trust and what actions are necessary for the new trust chief executive and its board to ensure that current and future patients receive sustainable safe care; and

further lessons arising for the mental health services, the NHS and the wider system.

The inquiry will not reopen the investigation of fixed potential ligature points that has given rise to the prosecution of Essex Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust by the Health and Safety Executive but may consider the evidence in this area.

The inquiry will be able to interview witnesses to determine if there were failures in care, safety, governance or professional standards and will examine all relevant records to get to the truth. We owe the families nothing less.

My Department will co-operate fully with the inquiry's investigation, including provision of any documents it might hold that are relevant to these issues and are requested by the inquiry.

Similarly, all NHS employees will be expected to give the inquiry their full co-operation.

I am moving forward with this important inquiry in order to shine a clear light on what happened at the trusts so that lessons can be learnt by the current trust and the NHS more widely. These lessons must be applied to the trust and the NHS to ensure that the provision of mental health services is improved and, critically, that lives are saved. This will require the investigation of some, possibly all, mental health in-patient deaths that occurred across the county between 2000 and 2020. Our focus must be on how we learn the lessons to improve services and prevent in-patient deaths in the future. The chair will want to consider what level of scrutiny of individual deaths is necessary to do this. However, there may be limits on the scrutiny that is possible of the earlier deaths that occurred during this period.

The chair will recommend a final terms of reference following consultation with the families and others affected by these events which I will communicate to Parliament in due course.

The inquiry will be formally established from April 2021 and will aim to report in the spring of 2023.

[HCWS729]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority: Annual Report and Accounts 2019-20

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): The 2019-20 annual report and accounts for the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority (GLAA) is being laid before the House

today and published on www.gov.uk. Copies will be available in the Vote Office. I am pleased to note that the GLAA continued to make progress with its important work in 2019-20 with a 26% increase in GLAA-led investigations and nearly 1,000 gangmasters licensed.

[HCWS731]

TRANSPORT

HS2 East Leg Spot Safeguarding

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson): I am today publishing additional safeguarding directions for the High Speed 2 (HS2) railway for the west midlands to Leeds (known as the phase 2b eastern leg) section of the HS2 route to reflect the latest design of the HS2 railway. Please note that the final design of the HS2 phase 2b eastern leg and its integration with Northern Powerhouse Rail will be determined by the Government's integrated rail plan, that I aim to publish early this year.

The latest safeguarding update includes a site east of Leeds. The site required by the HS2 rail project would support the potential integration between HS2 and Northern Powerhouse Rail.

The developer of the site has been made aware of the safeguarding directions prior to their publication as has the local planning authority, Leeds City Council. By protecting the site now, the Government guard against potentially conflicting development, which could otherwise disrupt the construction of HS2, as well as the risk of increased costs of building the new railway. This protects the public's interest in spending taxpayer money in a proportionate fashion.

The Government periodically review land requirements needed for the project and update the extent of safeguarding accordingly. It is anticipated that the land requirements for phase 2b of HS2 for the Crewe to Manchester (known as the phase 2b western leg) section of the route will be updated prior to the deposit of the relevant hybrid Bill.

A copy of the safeguarding directions will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses for record, and are publicly accessible online.

[HCWS727]

Dartford-Thurrock Crossing: Annual Accounts 2019-20

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Rachel Maclean): My noble Friend, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Baroness Vere of Norbiton) has made the following ministerial statement:

> Under regulation 3 (1) (d) of the Trunk Road Charging Schemes (Bridges and Tunnels) (Keeping of Accounts) (England) Regulations 2003, annual accounts for the Dartford-Thurrock crossing charging scheme are published today. The accounts relate to financial year 2019-20 and will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS728]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Diffuse Mesothelioma Payment Scheme Levy 2020-21

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Justin Tomlinson): The Diffuse Mesothelioma Payment Scheme (Levy) Regulations 2014 require active employers' liability insurers to pay an annual levy, based on their relative market share, for the purpose of meeting the costs of the diffuse mesothelioma payment scheme (DMPS). This is in line with the insurance industry's commitment to fund a scheme of last resort for sufferers of diffuse mesothelioma who have been unable to trace their employer or their employer's insurer.

Today I can announce that the total amount of the levy to be charged for 2020-21, the seventh year of the DMPS, is £28.9 million. The amount will be payable by active insurers by the end of March 2021.

Individual active insurers will be notified in writing of their share of the levy, together with how the amount was calculated and the payment arrangements. Insurers should be aware that it is a legal requirement to pay the levy within the set timescales.

I am pleased that the DMPS has seen six successful years of operation, assisting many hundreds of sufferers of diffuse mesothelioma. The sixth annual report for the scheme, along with the annual statistics were published on 26 November 2020 and is available on the gov.uk website. I hope that members of both Houses will welcome this announcement and give the DMPS their continued support.

[HCWS726]

Ministerial Correction

Thursday 21 January 2021

EDUCATION

Remote Education and Free School Meals

The following is an extract from an Opposition day debate on 18 January 2021.

Vicky Ford: 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.

[Official Report, 18 January 2021, Vol. 687, c. 723.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford):

An error has been identified in my response to the debate.

The correct response should have been:

Vicky Ford: 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 **urged the Department to encourage schools to use their catering teams as a first port of call to deliver free school meal provision during the lockdown**. That all-party group is chaired by a Labour MP.

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not later than
Thursday 28 January 2021

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