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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 2 February 2021

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

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

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

Oral Answers to Questions

JUSTICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Nightingale Courts

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): What progress he has made on planning for the (a) opening and (b) operation of Nightingale courts. [911684]

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): What progress he has made on planning for the (a) opening and (b) operation of Nightingale courts. [911692]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Chris Philp): Coronavirus has had an enormous effect globally and on public services in this country, which is why this year we have invested an extra quarter of a billion pounds to facilitate court recovery. As an important part of that we have already, as of today, opened up 40 additional Nightingale courtrooms, with a further 20 to open by the end of March.

Daniel Zeichner [V]: But there are huge delays in the justice system. Her Majesty's justice chief inspectors report 53,000 cases waiting to come before Crown courts. In Cambridgeshire, housing associations tell me that when they file papers for community protection notices, they are frequently lost or not even opened. Will the Minister tell me exactly how many Nightingale courts are hearing criminal trials today, and how many will be by the end of 2021?

Chris Philp: In relation to criminal cases, I am pleased to report to the House that since August last year, every single month, relentlessly, the number of disposals in the magistrates court has exceeded receipts, so the outstanding caseload in magistrates courts has been declining relentlessly since August, as the system has recovered. We now have more than 290 effective Crown court jury trials, which is more than we had before the pandemic, and just before Christmas disposals exceeded receipts for the first time during the pandemic. That quarter-of-a-billion-pound investment is working and

we are getting the justice system back on its feet following the very substantial and understandable challenges that coronavirus has presented.

Lilian Greenwood [V]: The Minister already knows that Nottinghamshire's police and crime commissioner, the chief constable and I are all extremely concerned about the delays in bringing serious criminal cases to trial and the failure to establish a Nightingale court in Nottinghamshire. I look forward to the discussion that he promised last week, but all Members will want to understand why progress is so slow. The Minister talked about 40 courts being open now and 60 by the end of March, but Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service said that 200 would be needed; what is preventing him from addressing that problem? How much investment has the Treasury earmarked for Nightingale courts?

Chris Philp: On the question of investment, I have already said that in the current financial year we have spent an extra quarter of a billion pounds on justice recovery. We are hiring an extra 1,600 HMCTS staff and we have more Crown court jury trial rooms operating than we did before the pandemic. I am, of course, carefully studying the proposals for Nightingale courts in Nottingham and look forward to a conversation with the hon. Member on that topic in the near future.

In terms of speeding up the system, even before coronavirus hit us we had increased expenditure on the Crown Prosecution Service by £85 million a year, hiring an extra 400 prosecutors, and we are on track to hire an extra 20,000 police officers. Our commitment not only to dealing with coronavirus but to speeding up the justice system more generally is clear for all to see.

Mr Speaker: Chorley is always ready to help the Minister as well.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con) [V]: The extra investment is important and should be recognised, and Nightingale courts can make an important addition to court capacity, but does my hon. Friend the Minister agree that most Nightingale courts are not equipped to handle custody cases and therefore many of the most serious trials? Is not the long-term solution sustained investment, over a period of months and years, to make sure that all available physical Crown courts sit the maximum number of days that they can safely sit, and to ensure that there are resources in terms of judiciary, support staff and a safe environment for court users, to make sure that that can be done? Is that not the top priority?

Chris Philp: As he is so often, my hon. Friend the Chair of the Justice Committee is correct. Often when a Nightingale court is set up, it does not have the required custody facilities, but it does free up space in our existing Crown court estate, which does have custody facilities, and allow more Crown court or jury trials in which the defendant is remanded to take place in existing facilities.

Crown court sitting days are very important. We have been clear that in the current financial year Crown court sitting days should not impose any constraints on listing and sitting cases. The situation for the coming financial year, starting in April, is the subject of discussions

between my right hon. Friend the Lord Chancellor and the Lord Chief Justice, Lord Burnett of Maldon, but it is fair to say that we are expecting a substantial increase in Crown court sitting days.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): The Government's answer to the question about the scale of the crisis in our justice system is that the backlog has been higher in the past, but the Minister knows that this is just a distraction. In 2010, Crown court cases took, on average, 391 days to complete. By 2019, the Government had closed half of the courts and had 27,000 fewer sitting days, meaning that each case took an average of 511 days. A total of 30% fewer cases were completed, but they took 75% longer. Each year that the Minister's party is in government, justice for victims is further delayed. How can he be so complacent, announcing just 40 extra rooms? We have 20 Nightingale courts and the head of Her Majesty's Courts Service said that we needed 200. When are we going to get them?

Chris Philp: A range of other measures are being used, not least the roll-out of the cloud video platform, which led last week to more than 20,000 remote hearings across all jurisdictions, and, as I have said, 290 jury court rooms, which is more than we had before. The right hon. Gentleman asked about the past, but he rather conveniently skated over the fact that the outstanding caseload in the Crown court before the pandemic in 2020 was 39,000, whereas in 2010, under the last Labour Government, it was 47,000. He asked about the number of cases and the number of cases being disposed of, but he neglected to mention that crime, according to the crime survey—the only Office for National Statistics-certified source of statistics—had fallen from 9.5 million cases in 2010 to 5.6 million in 2020 under a Conservative Government delivering reductions in crime. I notice that, last week, the shadow Justice Secretary talked about wartime juries of seven. I also noticed that, in June of last year, writing in *The Guardian* newspaper—

Mr Speaker: Order. Minister, I think you could have saved a little bit for later. It is a very full answer, but I now need to make progress.

Reoffending

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce reoffending. [911685]

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce reoffending. [911687]

Dr Jamie Wallis (Bridgend) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce reoffending. [911698]

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce reoffending. [911700]

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce reoffending. [911702]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Lucy Frazer): We are committed to cutting crime and reducing reoffending. A total of 80% of people in our prisons have reoffended, so if we want to cut crime we absolutely need to stop reoffending. In the past two weeks, we have announced a transformative cross-governmental package to address the underlying causes of reoffending: £80 million to increase the number of drug treatment places for

prison leavers; and £70 million investment to cut reoffending by supporting people from prison into accommodation.

Bob Blackman [V]: My hon. and learned Friend will know that, under the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, it is the duty of prison governors to enable people leaving prison to have a secure roof over their heads, so that they are not tempted to reoffend. I welcome the package of measures that has been introduced. Can she go further and explain the roll-out that will take place so that we can ensure that every person leaving prison is offered safe and secure accommodation, and is not tempted to return to a life of crime?

Lucy Frazer: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and, indeed, for the superb work that he has done in introducing the Homelessness Reduction Act. I commend him for his work in this area. He is right to reiterate the £70 million that we have put in to ensure that prisoners do not end up on the streets. That builds on what we have been doing throughout the pandemic: we have been operating an £11.5 million scheme to get people into accommodation from prison. That and other measures will continue to ensure that we cut crime and that people do not reoffend.

James Sunderland: It is important to support former prisoners, who sadly include ex-armed forces personnel, to ensure that they do not reoffend. Can my hon. and learned Friend please reassure me that her Department is committed to supporting probation services and the fine work that they do?

Lucy Frazer: I am very pleased to commend the work of the probation service, which has been doing important work at this time. We are supporting it with the finances that it needs, with increased funding of an additional £155 million per year, making a total of more than £1 billion for our probation services. That will enable us to recruit 1,500 additional probation officers next year. The investment will also allow us to help people from custody into the community and create specialist short-sentence teams so that prisoners get help before and after they go through the gate.

Dr Wallis [V]: The Dyfodol centre provides drug rehabilitation services in Bridgend town, and lots of businesses close to the centre are telling me that its presence has negatively impacted on them. The situation has been made worse during covid as the centre socially distances its users, often outside. G4S, which runs the centre, has engaged constructively with me on this and we now have an agreement in principle to move the service to a more appropriate location. Will my hon. and learned Friend meet me to discuss how her Department can facilitate and expedite this?

Lucy Frazer: We are aware that there have been some difficulties with the building in Bridgend, and we are working with the local community, via the commissioned services to which my hon. Friend refers, to find an alternative location. I know that he has discussed the issue with his Dyfodol partners, and I am happy to have a meeting to discuss it further.

Jacob Young: All too often, we see the same people committing the same crimes. In Redcar town, we have a specific issue where the same people are willing to steal from garages or to steal cars, sometimes just for a

couple of quid. Our Conservative candidate for police and crime commissioner, Steve Turner, wants to crack down on these repeat offenders by using technology and tagging, if he is elected in May. Will the Minister outline what more the justice system can do to stop reoffenders committing these so-called low-value crimes?

Lucy Frazer: The measures to which my hon. Friend refers—those which his prospective candidate is interested in—are exactly the measures that we are rolling out. We are looking at shortly rolling out tags for persistent offenders, and expanding and refreshing our integrated offender management tools to ensure that the police crack down on neighbourhood crime.

Danny Kruger [V]: I declare an interest as the founder and chairman of a prisoner rehabilitation charity. I very much welcome the announcement of a new package to support the reduction in reoffending that my hon. and learned Friend just mentioned. Does she agree that the dynamic framework for probation contracts should have an explicit objective of enabling small frontline charities and social enterprises to play a full role, with full cost recovery, in the delivery of rehabilitation services?

Lucy Frazer: I do agree, and I commend my hon. Friend for the work that he did before he came to Parliament to support youths at risk of reoffending. He will be interested to know that of the 221 organisations that qualified for the dynamic framework, nearly 80% are voluntary sector or community organisations. So far, we have awarded 17 contracts, four of which have been awarded to the voluntary sector or community organisations, but we hope to build on this. We expect the proportion of awards in those sectors to increase in the next round, because 70% of the personal wellbeing bids and 100% of the women's services contracts have come from organisations in those sectors. As I have discussed with him, we are also conducting a review of the first stages of the competition to ensure that we maximise those sectors' participation in future competitions.

Supporting Ex-Offenders into Work

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support ex-offenders into work. [911686]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Lucy Frazer): We know that offenders are 9% less likely to reoffend if they have a job, which is why we are working with the Department for Work and Pensions to increase the number of work coaches to ensure that ex-offenders have the support they need to enter into the workplace. That is in addition to the work that we are doing in the Ministry of Justice to build up the New Futures Network, which continues to broker partnerships between prisons and employers to improve employment opportunities for prisoners and prison leavers.

Stephen Crabb [V]: Getting information and opportunities to prison leavers as early as possible is key to helping them to build a new life on the outside, so does the Minister agree that the Government's excellent kickstart programme should be available to suitable offenders under the age of 25, and that ideally they need to get connected to the scheme before they leave the care of the Prison Service?

Lucy Frazer: I absolutely agree. It is appropriate that the work programmes that are available in the community are available to prison leavers. That is why I am working closely with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on this issue, including by delivering on our manifesto commitment to increase the number of prison work coaches, who will further support prison leavers. It is those work coaches who will enable us to connect to those long-term Government programmes.

Human Rights Act 1998

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): What plans he has to bring forward proposals to amend the Human Rights Act 1998. [911688]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Robert Buckland): The Government established the independent Human Rights Act review to examine the framework of the Act—how it is operating in practice and whether any change is required. The review will consider the approach taken by the domestic courts to the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights, and it will also examine whether the Act currently strikes the correct balance between the roles of the courts, the Government and Parliament. It will then consider whether—and, if so, what—reforms might be justified. It will report back in the summer and its report will be published, as well as the Government's response.

Angela Crawley [V]: Last week in the Joint Committee on Human Rights, Lord Neuberger pointed out that the Human Rights Act plays an important role in ensuring that people have access to justice and the means to protect their rights in court, and that the Act is even more vital as legal aid is squeezed. Does the Secretary of State agree with this statement, and does he recognise that removing human rights avenues at the same time as legal aid centres will reduce the ability of citizens to protect their human rights?

Robert Buckland: I agree with the noble Lord that the Act has played an important part in helping many applicants with important cases that have been brought before the courts. However, I can reassure the hon. Lady that the review is all about the framework of the Act itself, not about the scope of the convention rights that are scheduled within it, and the two issues should not be confused, either accidentally or intentionally.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP) [V]: I would like to start by noting the focus and perspicacity with which my predecessor, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), approached this role.

In my previous role as equalities spokesperson, I noted a change in narrative from those on the Government Benches, who had started to deny the existence of structural inequality based on, for example, race or disability. In my new role, I note that the same Government Members seem resistant to properly explaining the need for or aims of their review of the Human Rights Act. Are the two linked, and do this Government simply not recognise human rights and the need for robust legislation?

Robert Buckland: May I welcome the hon. Lady to her new role? I well remember working with her on the Investigatory Powers Bill in the 2015 Parliament. I will

not dwell upon the internal grief of the Scottish National party; I will simply pay tribute to the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), who always prosecuted her case with extreme perspicacity.

Let me reassure the hon. Lady in one word: no. They are not linked. As I have already said, this is not about the ambit of convention rights; it is a sensible and measured review of the mechanism that we have here domestically. It involves representatives from all corners of the United Kingdom, very much including Scotland. It has a balanced panel with a diversity of thought, and I am confident that it will produce robust and important recommendations.

Anne McLaughlin: I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman for his answer and his welcome, but I am not the only one questioning this Government's commitment, because the globally respected Human Rights Watch recently published a report stating that this UK Government showed a

“willingness to set aside human rights for the sake of political expediency and a worrying disdain for the rule of law.”

Is it wrong, and if so, can he offer any reason as to why it might have come to that conclusion?

Robert Buckland: Yes, it is totally wrong. In this Lord Chancellor, and indeed in every Minister, there is an absolute understanding and a deep respect for the rule of law, which underpins the United Kingdom Government's approach internationally, representing a force for good in world affairs and underpinning what is a proud liberal democracy. I and my colleagues will stand up steadfastly for that, and we do so with confidence and clarity.

Court Backlog

Craig Williams (Montgomeryshire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce the court backlog. [911689]

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): What progress he has made on reducing the backlog of cases in HM Courts and Tribunals Service. [911694]

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce the court backlog. [911697]

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce the court backlog. [911703]

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What progress he has made on reducing the backlog of cases in HM Courts and Tribunals Service. [911704]

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to tackle the backlog of court cases as a result of the covid-19 outbreak. [911709]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Chris Philp): The covid pandemic has had an enormous effect on public services, including the court system, but we have risen to that challenge, investing a total this year, as I said earlier, of an extra quarter of a billion pounds in court recovery. That has included installing 450 plexiglass screens in courtrooms to facilitate covid-safe hearings and installing the cloud video platform in 150 magistrates courts and 70 Crown courts to enable

remote hearings, which last week delivered a record in excess of 20,000 remote hearings across all jurisdictions. We are not resting. There is more work to do and this Government will take whatever action is required to ensure justice is delivered.

Craig Williams [V]: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer, and I welcome the establishment of the 40 Nightingale courtrooms and the rapid increase in the use of video technology, but may I reinforce a point and ask him to confirm the importance of prioritising urgent cases to protect the public during this extremely difficult time?

Chris Philp: My hon. Friend is right to raise the prioritisation of urgent cases. Listing is a judicial function and is a matter for judges, but I know that judges do prioritise the most urgent cases. For example, right from the beginning of the pandemic, domestic violence protection orders were one of those matters that were most prioritised. I hope I can also reassure my hon. Friend by saying that for those most serious Crown court cases where the prisoner was remanded in custody, well over half that had their first hearing in November will have had their substantive trial by July this year.

Alex Davies-Jones [V]: The Minister will I hope be aware that in the year ending March 2020, an astonishing 99% of rapes reported to the police in England and Wales resulted in no legal proceedings against the alleged perpetrators, and even the 1% of victims whose cases do proceed to the courts have to wait years for justice. What concrete steps is the Secretary of State taking to speed up the process and to address this appalling situation?

Chris Philp: The hon. Lady is right to draw the House's attention to this very serious problem, which most certainly does need to be sorted out. Some steps have been taken already, such as the roll-out of section 28 video-recorded evidence to help the most vulnerable witnesses, where that would be of assistance. Changes have also been made to disclosure rules very recently, which often pose obstacles in these kinds of cases. In fact, only yesterday the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) and the Lord Chancellor announced an additional £40 million to help victims, including victims of these terrible crimes, but it is fair to say that a great deal more needs to be done, as the hon. Lady rightly references. There is a cross-Government, cross-criminal justice system rape review currently being undertaken, led by the Minister for Crime and Policing. That will be reporting very shortly and will have further concrete actions in this very important area.

Peter Aldous [V]: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for those earlier answers. The additional funding that Suffolk constabulary has received for victims' services is extremely welcome, as many victims of the most horrific violent and sexual offences are, along with their families, in urgent need of additional support at a time when the period between charging and the commencement of a trial can now be between a year and 18 months. That delay is causing great distress, so to reduce the backlog of cases, will my hon. Friend provide more court staff and a Nightingale court in Suffolk to increase capacity in Crown courts?

Chris Philp: I can most certainly offer my hon. Friend an assurance about the additional staff. We are in the process of hiring an extra 1,600 HMCTS staff. As I mentioned to the Justice Committee Chairman, my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill) earlier, we are also expecting a significant increase in Crown court sitting days in the next financial year. More money is being invested in the Crown Prosecution Service, which of course brings these prosecutions, with an extra £85 million a year to hire 400 more prosecutors. The purpose of all those measures is to speed up the system in the way that my hon. Friend has rightly just requested. I would be very happy to study proposals for a Nightingale court in East Anglia. Perhaps we could discuss that after this session to see what ideas he has.

Jane Hunt [V]: My constituent owns a construction firm. He completed a significant project before the first lockdown, but his customer has not yet paid. He understands from his solicitor that it is impossible to submit a request for a winding-up order through the courts at present, even in cases where the temporary restrictions on them do not apply. If that is the case, what steps are the Government taking to ensure that businesses can request winding-up orders when required while covid restrictions are in place?

Chris Philp: It is important that people to whom debts are owed can enforce those debts and get judgment; it is the foundation upon which commercial transactions are built. I am not sure that I entirely recognise the situation to which my hon. Friend refers. Perhaps we can correspond after today's session, and I would be happy to look into the particulars of the case that she references and see whether I can assist in any way.

Rachael Maskell [V]: My constituent reported her case of historical sexual abuse four years ago. The trial is listed for mid-2022, but with court delays, there is no certainty. Meanwhile, this traumatised victim cannot access therapy, as it might jeopardise the conduct of the trial. She is seriously unwell. What equality impact assessment has the Minister undertaken on the impact of court delays on victims of sexual and domestic crime, and will he look to expedite those cases?

Chris Philp: I recognise the considerations that the hon. Lady raises. I know that when judges make listing decisions, they carefully take into account the sort of considerations that she rightly outlined. Of course, many of the delays in bringing these cases predate coming to trial; they might be related to issues to do with disclosure or the time it takes to investigate and then assemble the case. We hope that many of those issues can be addressed via the rape review, in addition to the work that is being done on disclosure rules, and the extra money going into the CPS will help. As I said, we recognise that there is a problem in this area, which the rape review and the other measures aim to address, because delays do not serve the interests of justice; they cause distress for victims, as the hon. Lady rightly says. That is one of the reasons we have invested so much extra money in supporting victims, but I agree that delivering speedy justice in this area is critical.

Mr Sheerman [V]: From all the evidence in Yorkshire and the north-east from judges, retired judges and senior barristers, I get the feeling that there are serious

problems. Is it not the case that the Government are using covid as a fig leaf for the fact that our justice system was in terminal crisis before covid, and we must have a renewal of our justice system and investment in it? When are we going to see the royal commission on criminal justice up and working?

Chris Philp: I am afraid that I do not recognise the hon. Gentleman's characterisation of the justice system prior to coronavirus. Waiting times in the magistrates court prior to coronavirus were about eight weeks, which is an entirely respectable figure. The outstanding case load in the Crown court prior to coronavirus—39,000—was quite low by historical standards and significantly lower than the 47,000 it was when Labour left office in 2010. Moreover, the HMCTS budget in 2020 was higher by some £200 million that it was in 2010. There is, of course, a great deal more that we need to do. A lot of money is being invested this year, and more money will be invested in the future. My right hon. and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor is working at pace on the royal commission on criminal justice, and we are expecting announcements in due course.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): It was revealed in a coroner's court last week that in August 2019, an 18-year-old woman who was a victim of sexual assault was told that she would not get her day in court for 19 months. The day after, she lost her life to an overdose. The coroner said that the two events were linked. This was six months before covid landed on our shores. It is not covid that broke our system of justice—it is this Government who did it. Will the Minister offer an apology to that young woman's family and to every single victim of assault and every single victim of crime in this country who is waiting month after month after month for justice?

Chris Philp: I have already pointed out that our justice system prior to coronavirus was in good shape, with magistrates court waiting times, as I said in response to the last question, at about eight weeks and a Crown court outstanding case load that was low by historical standards, but we do recognise the distress that witnesses and victims in particular suffer. That is why, only yesterday, the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), and the Lord Chancellor announced an additional £40 million to support victims—that is extra money on top of additional money already—because we recognise the importance of victims in this system. A rape review is under way to make sure that these cases are brought to court as quickly as they can be, because we do recognise that they are taking too long. However, that is not just a courts issue; it is to do with disclosure rules, putting a case together and properly investigating these cases. Of course, the extra 20,000 police officers will help. Victims are at the forefront of our mind, and we will do everything we can to look after and protect them.

Evictions and Bailiff Enforcement Activity: Covid-19

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the implications for his Department's policies of (a) evictions and (b) other enforcement activity conducted by bailiff organisations during the covid-19 outbreak. [911690]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Chalk): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising this issue. Effective enforcement is essential to the administration of justice, but it must be done safely during the pandemic. This Government have banned bailiffs from enforcing evictions in England, except in the most serious circumstances, until at least 21 February, to help control the spread of infection. We have published covid-safe guidance for bailiffs who are enforcing debts and fines, and have requested that they do not enter homes at present to take control of goods.

Mr Sharma [V]: I am glad that the Minister has touched on this, but I am sure he will agree that, in the middle of a deadly pandemic, there could be no worse time for hard-up families to receive a knock at the door, yet the Government are still permitting bailiffs to undertake unsafe and unfair doorstep enforcement action. The shadow Minister for legal aid, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner), has written to the Lord Chancellor twice in the last six months, urging him to pause home visits, as have 11 debt advice charities, which have also outlined widespread abuse of bailiff action during covid-19. Can we have a very clear answer from the Minister: will he reimpose the ban on home visits from the first national lockdown, and will he deliver on the Government's 18-month-old promise of better industry regulations?

Alex Chalk: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. It is very important to distinguish between evictions and enforcement. In respect of evictions, the Government have been very clear: people cannot be evicted before 21 February unless arrears are of over six months. In normal circumstances, if someone simply had two months of arrears, they could then be subject to enforcement action. Now there needs to be six months' notice before possession proceedings even start. This Government are clear that we want to ensure that enforcement agents do not contribute to the spread of this virus, and that is why we have strict regulations in place.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab) [V]: We have, on average, over 20,000 new covid infections each day and, tragically, more than 1,000 deaths, so how can the Minister possibly justify allowing bailiffs to crack on with business as usual in the midst of this deadly pandemic?

Alex Chalk: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, but he knows and I know that it is not business as usual. In making that remark, he has completely disregarded the guidance that is in place. Of course we want to make sure that these proceedings happen safely. That is why Public Health England has considered these matters, and it is satisfied with the situation as it exists. We have to make sure in this Government that we respect all rights, including convention rights—article 1 of protocol 1—and he should be in favour of that too.

Prison Service Pay Review Body Recommendation 3

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect on prison officer (a) recruitment, (b) retention and (c) morale of his Department's decision to reject the Prison Service Pay Review Body's recommendation 3. [911691]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Lucy Frazer): In July 2020, the Government accepted in full six out of seven recommendations made by the Prison Service Pay Review Body. This delivered an increase of at least 2.5%, with some staff receiving up to 7% with progression. This delivered an above-inflation increase, and it was the third year in a row that prison staff have benefited from a pay award of at least 2%. In rejecting recommendation 3, the impact on recruitment, retention and staff morale were carefully considered alongside affordability and value for money for the taxpayer. I would like to say that I highly value the work of the prison staff, and the decision to reject recommendation 3 should in no way suggest otherwise.

Rachel Hopkins [V]: Prison officers are poorly paid for the incredibly difficult job that they do, and the Government's experts recommended a £3,000 pay rise for band 3 prison officers to tackle the crisis in recruitment, retention and morale. The Government are committed to departing from their recommendations only under exceptional circumstances, so will the Minister explain what exceptional circumstances justify not paying band 3 prison officers what they deserve?

Lucy Frazer: To repeat, I recognise the very difficult work that prison officers are doing up and down the country at this time. The pay proposals that we have accepted deliver an increase in pay, and as I mentioned, we took into account factors including affordability and value for money at this time.

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab) [V]: Violence in our prisons has increased massively over the past decade, and skilled staff are essential to keep prisons safe. The Minister knows that the pay review body recommended a one-off increase to wages in band 3 as a job retention package, to ensure that our prisons keep the staff they need. She knows that staff and vulnerable prisoners will be at greater risk if yet more skilled officers leave the profession, so let me give her another chance to answer the question: she chose to ignore that recommendation—why?

Lucy Frazer: I would like to address the point that the hon. Lady raised about violence in our prisons. I am pleased that violence in the adult male estate has gone down over recent months. Of course we accept that it is too high, and we must continue to do more to protect our prison officers. That is why we are rolling out body-worn cameras, and why we have 24/7 counselling and trauma support, as well as other things to support prison officers. Of course pay is a critical factor in the way that people value their job, and we are introducing a package of measures to ensure that prison officers continue well in their roles.

Covid-19: Court Estate

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of the steps taken by HM Courts and Tribunals Service to mitigate the risks of covid-19 infection on the court estate. [911693]

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of the steps taken by HM Courts and Tribunals Service to mitigate the risks of covid-19 infection on the court estate. [911714]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Chris Philp): We take covid safety very seriously, and as I said earlier, we have invested £0.25 billion in making our courts covid-safe this year. That has involved the buildings and other measures that include plexiglass screens, nightingale courts, social distancing, and an enhanced cleaning regime. We work closely, of course, with Public Health England to ensure that our courts are covid-safe.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle [V]: Solicitors in my constituency, particularly those who may be vulnerable, have contacted me to say that they are frightened to attend court due to the lack of safety provisions. That has led to some of them refusing to take on new cases, and resulted in defendants not having the levels of representation to which they are entitled, and further backlogs. Those solicitors have a simple request: that the Court Service resumes video remand hearings, such as those in place at the peak of the first lockdown, so that we can get through the backlog and they can conduct their work from home if possible, which is the Government's national advice.

Chris Philp: The Lord Chief Justice rightly gave a direction in January at the beginning of this lockdown that every case that can be heard remotely should be, for all the reasons mentioned by the hon. Gentleman. Video remand hearings have been recommenced as much as possible, and they are used a lot more now than they were in December, for example. I reassure the hon. Gentleman's constituents that Public Health England says that our court estate is safe, and incidents of covid among Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunal Service staff are no higher or lower than in the general population. I hope that gives his constituents confidence to continue their work in person where that is absolutely necessary.

Mr Speaker: The connection to the hon. Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) who has the next question has failed so we will go straight to the shadow Minister.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): Labour Members share the horror of the legal profession at the fact that the already huge court backlog has increased by 35% since the start of the pandemic, and now includes more than 53,000 Crown Court cases. Lawyers want to keep the justice system open and moving, but it is wrong to ask them to pay for years of Tory cuts by putting their health and safety at risk. Like everyone else they are anxious, and given the hundreds of covid cases across the court estate, as revealed in answers to my parliamentary questions, we should not be surprised. More than 100 new cases were reported in just eight days in January alone. Sadly, we hear that precautions vary considerably across the country, so what new measures will the Minister take in the estate to ensure that all courts operate best practice, and provide those who use them with a guarantee that they will be safe?

Chris Philp: We have already invested, as I have said repeatedly this morning, a quarter of a billion pounds in total this financial year to make our court estate covid-safe. That is why we have managed to keep the court system operating in the month of January and beyond in a way that was very difficult back in March and April last year. Public Health England is regularly consulted.

On the covid cases the hon. Gentleman mentions, there are tens of thousands of people passing through our court system every day, and the number of covid cases reported among HMCTS staff is in line with what we would expect in the general population. Indeed, those cases are now going down. Best practice is being adopted. Our courts are safe. Of course, where hearings can be done remotely they should be, as we are doing here in Parliament, and that is why we had over 20,000 remote hearings across all jurisdictions last week, but where hearings have to be done in person courts are safe to hear them.

Topical Questions

[911744] **Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con):** If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Robert Buckland): The criminal justice system can struggle to meet the needs of those who live with serious mental health problems or conditions such as autism and learning disabilities or learning difficulties sometimes described as neurodivergent conditions. That is something we are determined to change. Last month, we announced landmark reforms to the Mental Health Act 1983 that will strengthen the role that our justice system plays in protecting the most vulnerable, enhancing vital checks and balances to ensure that patients' rights and wishes are respected, and making sure that offenders with serious mental health problems can gain access to the care they need as quickly and as early as possible. At the same time, we commissioned an independent review to increase our understanding of neurodiversity in justice services, so that we can see what provision is available currently and how we can improve support in the future. A greater emphasis on specialist needs will enable us to build back a fairer and more effective criminal justice system.

Duncan Baker [V]: I would like to pay tribute to all the incredibly hard work that prison staff in my constituency at HMP Bure in North Norfolk have contended with over the pandemic. There have been some extraordinary dedicated staff working long hours with onerous duties as we fight the pandemic. Can my right hon. and learned Friend tell me, given the risks prison staff are facing, what assessment has been of vaccinating them as soon as possible?

Robert Buckland: I join my hon. Friend in his tribute to staff not only at HMP Bure but at every institution in the prison estate and the wider Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service community for the tireless work they have been doing since the outbreak of the pandemic.

My hon. Friend is right to point to the importance of vaccination. Already, prison staff who come within the existing criteria in wave one are being vaccinated in accordance with the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation advice. For the next phase, I am strongly and actively supporting the prioritisation of prison staff. My officials are working on that with the Department of Health and Social Care. The JCVI has already said that

"those involved in the justice system" should be considered for prioritisation. I strongly agree.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): Cases of covid-19 are now getting out of control in our prisons. In December, there were 75 cases per 1,000 in prison compared to 46 in

the wider community. There are 87 outbreaks, across an estate of 170, in prisons in England and Wales. There have been reports of prisoners who have tested positive for coronavirus leaving cells and being taken to court, putting all at risk. In December, the total number of deaths in prison throughout the whole pandemic spiked by 50% in just one month. Can the Secretary of State tell the House how many prisoners and prison staff died after being infected by the coronavirus in the month of January?

Robert Buckland: I will furnish those precise figures to the right hon. Gentleman when they are finally available, which will be very shortly. May I deal with the general points that he makes? It is important to note that an outbreak is defined as any number of cases in excess of two in our prisons. Every case is regrettable, but it is important to put this in context: at the moment, as I speak, two thirds of the prison estate either has no outbreaks at all or outbreaks of fewer than 10 cases. That is an important qualification. Clearly, as a result of testing, which we have ramped up right across the estate, we are able to identify more asymptomatic prisoners, and we test prisoners before they go to court. Nobody who presents with symptoms should be presented at court anyway.

This work has been impressive. The quarantine compartmentalisation work that the right hon. Gentleman knows about continues, and I am confident from my daily briefings with Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service that everything is being done to control outbreaks in our prisons. It is not right, with respect to him, to say that this is out of control in our prisons. That, frankly, is an insult to the hard work that staff are doing every day to contain covid-19.

[911745] **Andrea Leadsom** (South Northamptonshire) (Con): Is my right hon. and learned Friend aware of the early years healthy development review that is under way? Can he tell me what support is available to new babies and their mothers who are in the prison system?

Robert Buckland: I pay warm tribute to my right hon. Friend. Indeed, I met her recently in connection with her important work, which she has championed for many years. She will be glad to know that women on mother and baby units are supported by multidisciplinary teams to enable mothers to have the positive experience with their babies that she passionately believes in, and I share that belief. We still apply covid compassionate leave, the most recent release having taken place last month. There are individual care management plans for all pregnant women as well. We are in the process of a fundamental review of all policy here to make sure that we are getting it right for as many women as possible.

[911748] **Janet Daby** (Lewisham East) (Lab) [V]: During the pandemic, women in prison have experienced an intensified lockdown. Many women are permitted only 30 minutes outside their cell a day and 30 minutes every other day for exercise. Alongside this and many other restrictions, the Ministry of Justice's most recent safety in custody statistics showed that incidents of self-harm and suicide in women's prisons have increased by 8% in 2020. I and the public need to know what the Government

are going to do to protect these women from having a mental health crisis in prison and to ensure that transformative rehabilitation is effective.

Robert Buckland: The hon. Lady is right to raise the particular challenges facing women prisoners. There does seem to be a different effect of the current restrictions on women prisoners as opposed to the male estate. Sadly, we have seen rates of self-harm and, indeed, repeated self-harm from individual prisoners increase. I assure her that the female offender strategy that we launched two years ago is at the heart of our considerations. It is all about understanding why a lot of women not just self-harm, but end up in the custodial estate in the first place. We continue with work on that. More investment is coming, with the creation of secure centres. We will continue to look at ways in which we can reimagine and redesign how women are incarcerated. She will be glad to note that overall numbers in the custodial estate remain quite low compared with recent years as a result of covid and, indeed, the approach that the courts have been taking.

[911746] **Dr James Davies** (Vale of Clwyd) (Con) [V]: Despite best efforts, the transfer of prisoners increases the risk of covid-19 transmission. With prison occupancy 6% lower than at this time last year, what steps is my right hon. and learned Friend taking to ensure that transfers take place only where absolutely necessary?

Robert Buckland: My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue. We have taken steps to minimise the risk from transfers. We allow only essential transfers—for example, where courts need to be served and justice must carry on. We have clear policies in place to define the need for essential transfers, and we have our compartmentalisation strategy, which means that new admissions to prisons are kept separate from the general population. We are testing new prisoners and, indeed, testing those being transferred between prisons to minimise the risk of spreading the virus.

[911749] **Mike Hill** (Hartlepool) (Lab) [V]: All too often, people who commit retail crime escape a custodial sentence. The Scottish Parliament recently passed legislation that will provide frontline retail workers with important protection from abuse and violence when they serve their communities. Will this Government finally ensure that key retail workers in England and Wales are covered by similar specific legislation?

Robert Buckland: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that important issue. He is right to talk about retail workers being on the frontline. He can be reassured that in relation to offences such as assault and other serious crimes well known to the law, the Sentencing Council has set out guidelines in which it specifically refers to people such as retail workers in an important public service position, which means that the courts should be increasing sentences and finding aggravating factors where shop workers have been the victims of crime. I think all of us in this House share the need to support our shop workers, particularly at this time of covid when they have done an outstanding service to us all.

[911747] **Dr Luke Evans** (Bosworth) (Con) [V]: I have met my local police and had many letters from my constituents who are concerned about covid-related offences, including breaches of lockdown, spitting, vaccine fraud and grant fraud. What assessment has my right hon. and learned Friend made of the effectiveness of legislation in prosecuting covid-related offences?

Robert Buckland: My hon. Friend is quite right to highlight the particularly egregious nature of offences that are based either on the threatened spread of covid or on the abuse of trust that is inherent with anybody who purports to be a vaccinator but who tries to profit out of it. Having considered the matter carefully with my officials, I think that we have provisions within the Fraud Act 2006 that can cover a lot of the false representations that are being made. Indeed, there does not need to be a detriment proved as a result of the provisions of that Act. We also have other legislation. Any spitting, for example, is an assault and should be treated as such, and I note that a number of cases have been brought against the perpetrators of that appalling crime.

[911750] **Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South) (Lab) [V]: The Minister claimed just now that the pay rise for band 3 prison officers needed to be affordable and value for money, so given that more than £30 million is currently wasted due to the hundreds of frontline prison officers leaving the service within their first two years, and that much of the extra spend would be returned to the Treasury through taxation, is not rejecting this fair and sustainable pay rise simply a false economy?

Robert Buckland: The hon. Lady is right to raise the position with regard to our outstanding prison officers. She can be reassured that as a result of the Chancellor's announcement regarding the pay freeze, a lot of officers will receive the £250 rise next year, and there will be incremental increases to pay that are part of their current terms of employment. I hear what she says about the particular decision that we had to take. It was not an easy one. We are living in exceptional times, and I will continue to work as constructively as possible with the Prison Officers Association and other representative bodies to ensure not only that we reflect the need for support for our prison officers but that we retain as many of them as possible. It is not an easy balancing exercise. We did carry out the vast majority of the recommendations, but considering the times in which we live at the moment, that particular recommendation was not one we felt able to support at this time.

[911751] **Antony Higginbotham** (Burnley) (Con): This week is children's mental health awareness week, and information from the Children's Commissioner indicates that there are more than 1,000 children in Burnley who live in a household where domestic violence occurs. Could my right hon. and learned Friend therefore update us on the status of the Domestic Abuse Bill, which will protect all victims of domestic abuse including the children who witness it?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Chalk): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that point so powerfully. We fully recognise the devastating impact that domestic abuse has on children

and their futures. The Domestic Abuse Bill will ensure that all children who experience the effects of domestic abuse are considered victims of domestic abuse in their own right, whether or not they are related to the victim or the perpetrator. I am pleased to report that the Bill was given a Second Reading in the other place last month, and we expect it to complete its passage by the spring.

[911753] **David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): With the introduction of the early release scheme at the outset of the pandemic, more prisoners will have needed assistance with their pre-release benefits from Department for Work and Pensions prison co-ordinating staff. Can the Lord Chancellor confirm that the DWP prison staff have indeed returned under covid-19 guidelines to help prisoners as part of that pre-release process?

Robert Buckland: The hon. Gentleman makes a very reasonable point. I can assure him that the degree of partnership with the DWP is better than it has ever been, with work coaches in our prisons to support prisoners prior to their release, in the weeks and months beforehand. Indeed, we are working actively to make sure that if benefit is needed, for example, it can be available in loan form on release. Of course, on Friday we made a major announcement about accommodation for people who are released from prison. It is all part of an overall approach that involves a home, a job and a friend, and of course the benefits system is playing its part in helping to improve that provision.

[911752] **Robert Halfon** (Harlow) (Con) [V]: Harlow resident Charlotte Budd, who is a survivor of domestic abuse, suffered a great deal from her experiences in the family court system. I would be grateful if my right hon. and learned Friend could provide an update on what steps the Government are taking to address the concerns brought to light by the Ministry of Justice report on assessing the risk of harm to children and parents in private law children cases. Will he also explain what measures the Government are taking to make certain that the correct guidance and education is in place for members of our judiciary in dealing with domestic abuse cases such as that of Charlotte Budd?

Alex Chalk: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for raising that point so perfectly on behalf of his constituent. Good progress is being made following the expert panel's report. First, we have launched a review into the presumption of parental involvement. Secondly, the design of the pilot integrated domestic abuse courts is under way. Thirdly, measures in the Domestic Abuse Bill to provide further protection to victims and survivors who use the family courts are passing through the other place. Guidance is a matter for the judiciary, but I have raised this with the president of the family division and he is very much seized of it and will consider making recommendations on judicial training to the judicial college in light of the recommendations of the harms panel and other developments.

[911755] **Zarah Sultana** (Coventry South) (Lab) [V]: Covid is spiralling out of control in prisons. In December, deaths surged by 50% and cases by 70%. Unlike during

the last lockdown, the Government insist that non-essential workers go in and out of prisons every single day, risking spreading the virus. The University and College Union, which represents prison educators, tells me that teachers are not even allowed to prepare lessons or carry out marking at home. Instead, they have to go into prisons to print worksheets, deliver them to cells, pick them up from cells and mark them on site. Will the Minister please intervene to stop this reckless practice?

Robert Buckland: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, but she must not repeat the myth that covid is out of control in our prisons. It serves nobody's interests, least of all those of staff who are working day and night to control it. She makes an important point about education. Clearly, in this lockdown we wanted to ensure that more education and skills training were available. That is absolutely right and everyone would support it. However, there is a problem with what she says because, of course, the passage of paper and other documents in and out of prison inherently poses a security risk. That is the reality we live in and it is therefore important that we balance the needs of prison security alongside the needs of prisoners to access education. I will look carefully at the point she makes, but I think she will understand that a sensitive balance has to be struck.

[911754] **Robert Largan** (High Peak) (Con): Many of our Victorian prisons are still in use. These prisons are typically located in densely populated inner-city areas. What plans do the Government have to replace these old prisons with modern facilities that are safer for both inmates and guards, much cheaper to run and more effective at rehabilitation and at reducing reoffending rates? There is an opportunity not just dramatically to improve our prisons but to raise significant funds to be reinvested back into the justice system and to free up much-needed land for housing in inner-city areas.

Robert Buckland: My hon. Friend will understand that it is very important that proper calculations are made about prison capacity and that we do not end up in a position like that under the last Labour Government when we were having to use police cells to house prisoners, which was both expensive and, frankly, inhumane. He

will know about and will welcome the huge commitment of £4 billion to deliver 18,000 additional prison places—modern places—across the estate by the middle of this decade. That additional space will allow us to do even more purposeful activity. On maintenance, we have committed £315 million next year—a huge increase on the previous capital settlement for maintenance—because we need to get on with ensuring that our current estate is decent, safe and secure.

[911756] **Yvonne Fovargue** (Makerfield) (Lab) [V]: There are yet more reports this week of bailiffs on people's doorsteps breaking the rules meant to govern their behaviour. In view of those reports, will the Minister meet me and representatives of concerned charities, such as StepChange and Citizens Advice, to discuss what further measures can be taken to protect vulnerable people?

Alex Chalk: We have been very clear that there should be no enforcement of evictions during this pandemic—the law is in place—save for the most exceptional and egregious circumstances. I am very concerned to hear the hon. Lady's point about bailiffs behaving inappropriately. I would of course be delighted to meet her to discuss it further.

[911757] **Damien Moore** (Southport) (Con) [V]: What steps is my hon. Friend taking to increase the provision of Nightingale courts during the pandemic?

Alex Chalk: This Government consider the opening of Nightingale courts to be absolutely essential. I have visited a number myself. They play an important role in taking the strain, allowing other courts to carry out custody cases. We have already opened 40 Nightingale courts—an additional 20. That will play an important role in our ongoing courts recovery.

Mr Speaker: I will now suspend the House for three minutes to enable the necessary arrangements for the next business.

12.36 pm

Sitting suspended.

Northern Ireland Protocol: Implementation

12.39 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster if he will make a statement on the implementation of the Northern Ireland protocol.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) for the chance to update the House on recent developments on the Northern Ireland protocol.

On Friday afternoon, the European Commission, without prior consultation, published a regulation to enable restrictions on the export of vaccines from the EU. That regulation also invoked article 16 of the Northern Ireland protocol, barring the free movement of medicines from Ireland into Northern Ireland.

It is important to be clear about what was proposed: not only plans to stop vaccines being delivered through legally binding contracts, at the height of a pandemic, but critically, a unilateral suspension of the painstakingly designed and carefully negotiated provisions of the protocol, which the EU has always maintained was critical to safeguarding the gains of the Northern Ireland peace process.

Article 16 exists for good reasons, but it is meant to be invoked only after notification and only after all other options are exhausted, and in the interests of the people of Northern Ireland. None of those conditions was met. Worse still, neither the UK Government, representing the people of Northern Ireland, nor the Irish Government, an EU member, were informed. The Commission's move has provoked anger and concern across all the parties and throughout civil society in Northern Ireland, as well as international condemnation.

Following the reaction, the Commission did withdraw its invocation of article 16 and subsequently clarified, in conversations with my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, that it would not interfere with vaccine supplies to Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I am grateful to the Prime Minister for his robust and sensitive intervention, and also to the Taoiseach, the Northern Ireland Executive and Vice-President Maroš Šefčovič for moving quickly to resolve the situation on Friday evening, but trust has been eroded, damage has been done and urgent action is therefore needed.

Peace, progress and strong community relations in Northern Ireland have been hard won, but in recent days we have seen an increase in community tension and, as was reported last night, port staff in Belfast and Larne have been kept away from work following concerns for their safety. The decision was taken by Northern Ireland's Agriculture Minister, Edwin Poots, and the local council. My right hon. Friend the Northern Ireland Secretary is engaging closely with the police and authorities on this issue, and of course, the safety and security of staff are the absolute priority.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Edwin Poots for his dedicated work. He is, coincidentally, stepping down from his post for health reasons this week, and I am sure all of us in the House would want to send him every good wish.

Fixing problems on the ground now requires us all to work calmly. The EU needs to work with us, at speed and with determination, to resolve a series of outstanding issues with the protocol. I am grateful to Vice-President Šefčovič for his understanding of the need to make progress to see these problems resolved and to ensure that the protocol does what it was designed to do: avoid disruption to everyday lives while protecting Northern Ireland's place in the UK internal market and our customs territory.

I am also grateful to the First Minister of Northern Ireland and her Executive colleagues for their close working with the UK Government and their shared determination to resolve these issues. We will work over coming days to fix the difficulties on the ground, preserve the gains of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement and, of course, uphold Northern Ireland's place as an integral part of our United Kingdom.

Louise Haigh: May I join the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster in sending all our best wishes to Minister Edwin Poots for a speedy recovery?

The European Commission's actions on Friday night were a serious mistake. Of that there can be absolutely no doubt, and I very much welcome the right hon. Gentleman's response, but they must not be used as an excuse to go back to square one and undermine the protocol, with all the damage and instability that that would cause. Yesterday, as he has said, we saw staff withdrawn from the ports of Larne and Belfast because of alleged threats to their safety. This is totally unacceptable, and we all have a responsibility to dial down our rhetoric and to ensure that people in Northern Ireland are safe.

After the difficult past few days, calm heads must now prevail and serious, pragmatic, practical politics must begin to find shared solutions to the legitimate concerns and to ease tensions. With those practical solutions in mind, the looming end of the grace periods in April and July is causing serious concern for businesses, so will the right hon. Gentleman convene urgent sessions of the Specialised and Joint Committees to secure long-term mitigations of unnecessary red tape? Does he agree that an extension to those grace periods might be necessary?

Will the right hon. Gentleman update the House on the work that the Government have been doing to get British-based businesses up to speed on new requirements? Can he confirm that EU officials have all the access necessary to the databases they need to do their work? Will he ensure the joint consultative working group is urgently established so that politicians, industry and civil society in Northern Ireland have a formal structure to engage with? Finally, will he advise on how he will ensure that the protocol is never again undermined and that the political realities he has outlined regarding its existence are well understood by all concerned? What steps have been taken to reassure all communities in Northern Ireland that their lives and livelihoods will be protected?

The events of the last few days demonstrate that all sides have a profound responsibility to uphold the protocol and ensure that it works for all communities. They showed the dangers of unilateral action. It is now vital that, together, shared solutions are found that ease disruption, preserve stability and protect the gains of peace.

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her comments, which I wholeheartedly endorse. She is absolutely right to say that it was a serious mistake on the part of the Commission; I think everyone recognises that now. I also underline her words that it is completely unacceptable to place anyone in Northern Ireland in the position in which the port workers in Belfast and Larne have been placed, so it is vital that everyone in Northern Ireland and indeed in the UK exercises calmness and moderation as well as resolution in seeking to resolve the problems that she outlined.

The hon. Lady is absolutely right that the end of grace periods for export health certificates and other issues do need to be addressed. I will be writing to Vice-President Maroš Šefčovič later today to outline some specific steps that we believe we need to take. Tomorrow, I will meet him and the First Minister and Deputy First Minister of the Northern Ireland Executive in order to ensure that we can make rapid progress through the Joint Committee.

We are also communicating with UK businesses to stress that they have an obligation to ensure that their goods are available for the citizens of Northern Ireland in the same way as they are available to her and my own constituents. It is not just the Government's responsibility but the responsibility of all of us to work together to ensure that the people of Northern Ireland recognise that they are valued citizens of one United Kingdom.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con) [V]: I am sure my right hon. Friend will agree that we have to make the protocol work and work well, but the window for doing so is small and shrinking. May I urge him during this month, with Exocet focus and precision, to iron out speedily with the Joint Committee those creases and teething problems that have been identified in order to spend next month—March—explaining those solutions to businesses across the United Kingdom and what they need to do? My judgment is that to extend the grace period would not be desirable, but business needs to have confidence and certainty, so all power to the Joint Committee for speedy and focused work.

Michael Gove: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the work that he and his Committee have done to help ensure that the protocol is well understood and to resolve some of the problems that have arisen. There are a number of specific issues. I alluded earlier to the requirement that export health certificates are provided, but, as his Committee well knows, there are other issues such as the grace period covering the supply of chilled meats to Northern Ireland and the movement of pets between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. All those issues and more are ways in which the protocol is having an impact on people in Northern Ireland that is not in the interests of Northern Ireland, the United Kingdom or, indeed, good relations between us and the EU. Vice-President Maroš Šefčovič totally understands the need to resolve these issues and, with good will, I believe that we can do so speedily, as my hon. Friend rightly points out that we need to.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP) [V]: I extend my best wishes to Mr Poots for a speedy recovery. The indication from the EU that it was considering triggering article 16 was a significant error of judgment—albeit one that was quickly walked back. Nevertheless, it was a

mis-step that has followed significant problems with the Northern Ireland protocol, with businesses facing delays—and perhaps not helped by the Prime Minister saying that he would have no hesitation in triggering article 16 after spending months denying that there would be any kind of post-Brexit checks between Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

We now have a situation that has escalated to the point that port inspection staff have needed to be withdrawn from their duties over concerns for their safety, which is completely unacceptable. Can the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster give me an assurance and explain how he intends to work with the Northern Ireland Executive, the Irish Government and the EU to de-escalate all the issues around this matter and explain what further steps he will take to ensure that the protocol—an agreement entered into freely—works as it needs to for the benefit of all in Northern Ireland?

Michael Gove: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his elevation to the Front Bench in the SNP shadow Cabinet reshuffle that has just taken place. I look forward to working with him, as, I know, does my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

I disagree with the hon. Gentleman on one point. I think the Prime Minister was absolutely right to say that, if necessary, article 16 can be invoked. There is a difference between recognising that it is there as an emergency cord to pull if we need to in order to ensure that the rights and interests of the people in Northern Ireland are protected, but it can be invoked only in specific circumstances, none of which, as the hon. Gentleman knows and has acknowledged, were in place when the European Commission invoked it. More broadly, we all want to make sure that the lives of people in Northern Ireland can be as safe, secure, prosperous and free as possible, in the same way as any other citizen of the United Kingdom. I look forward to working with the hon. Gentleman's colleagues in the Scottish Government to ensure, through provisions such as the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020, that we continue to do everything necessary to safeguard our precious Union.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con) [V]: Does my right hon. Friend not agree that the reality is that the protocol is simply not working? These are not teething problems. He mentioned article 16, but article 16 is very clear that it can be invoked if the protocol leads to “economic, societal and environmental problems” leading, for example, to a “diversion of trade”. We have already seen companies that normally ship to Northern Ireland now saying publicly that they will not bother to do so any more if it is too difficult. We are also seeing diversion: some supermarkets and others are talking about depots in southern Ireland rather than in mainland GB. Therefore, for all the talks about teething problems, what will he do in the short term to rectify this terrible disaster, with advertisers now saying that they simply cannot supply goods to people in Northern Ireland? What will he do both in the short term and the longer term to rectify the mess that is becoming obvious with this particular protocol?

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend is right that the problem needs to be addressed both in the short and in the medium to long term. In the short term, there are a number of issues that I would not describe as teething

problems; they are significant issues that bear on the lives of people in Northern Ireland, which do need to be resolved. We need to make sure that grace periods are extended. We need to make sure that supermarkets and other traders can continue—as they are at the moment—to be able to supply consumers with the goods that they need. There are a number of specific issues and they extend, as I mentioned earlier, to everything from pet transport to the provision of plants and seeds to gardens in Northern Ireland. The daily life of our fellow citizens does need to be protected and we must deal with all those questions. In the medium to long term, it is important that we take all the steps required to ensure that citizens in Northern Ireland recognise that they are an integral part of the UK and that their daily lives and the way in which this Parliament works reflect that fully.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP) [V]: May I express my appreciation to the Minister and colleagues for their kind words about my constituency colleague and friend, Edwin Poots?

The Democratic Unionist party opposed this protocol from the outset because we recognised that it would cause societal and economic problems for Northern Ireland—for businesses and consumers—and would lead to a significant diversion of trade, as has been evident in its first month of operation. Fundamentally, this protocol upsets the very delicate balance of relationships that were provided for under the Belfast agreement. There is no Unionist supporting this protocol. What we need is not tinkering around the edges but a recognition that Northern Ireland's place in the UK internal market must be restored, and this protocol is preventing that from happening.

Michael Gove: I entirely appreciate and understand the right hon. Gentleman's point of view. He is right: he and his party colleagues issued consistent warnings and concerns about the operation of the Northern Ireland protocol. At the same time, he and his party have been working in the context of a protocol with which they disagree and which has uncomfortable aspects for many of us, in order to ensure that we can address specific issues to improve the lives of people in Northern Ireland. I want to continue to work with him and his colleagues in the Northern Ireland Executive. Thanks to him and his party colleagues making representations, questions on, for example, the import of steel from the rest of the world and VAT on cars have already been addressed. It is in that spirit that we will continue to work with him and his colleagues to address these issues. Of course, he is right: if necessary, article 16 is there, and it can be invoked. But I want to ensure that in the days ahead, we make a practical and beneficial difference to his constituents and others in Northern Ireland.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con) [V]: I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. The actions of the European Commission on Friday not only worried my constituents about vaccine supplies but worried everybody on the island of Ireland. Does he share my view that its actions not only constituted a clear breach of the rules set out in annex 7 of the Northern Ireland protocol but risked cutting across the Belfast agreement itself?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is striking that every political party in Northern Ireland, every political party in the Irish Republic and every political party in this House recognises that a mistake was made. It is important that we take this opportunity to recognise that trust has been eroded, and rapid work to restore that trust needs to be undertaken.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD) [V]: On behalf of my party, I join those who have expressed sympathies and sent good wishes to Edwin Poots.

May I invite the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster to join me in condemning those who were responsible for the attacks yesterday on Alliance party offices in Northern Ireland, including those of the hon. Member for North Down (Stephen Farry), and to make it clear that there is no place in our politics in any part of this United Kingdom for that sort of intimidation? Do those attacks not illustrate the importance of using the time available to us in the grace period to get things right, so that we do not see what his colleagues elsewhere in government have called “teething problems”, come the end of that grace period? So much of this paperwork can now be done digitally. Are the Government going ahead in that direction?

Michael Gove: I am always grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his interventions, because he so often talks good sense, and I find myself uncomfortably agreeing with him—not all the time, but a lot of time. He is absolutely right: the threats that have been issued to Alliance party and other political and community leaders in Northern Ireland are totally unacceptable, and we need to stand together against that sort of behaviour. He is also right that we need to help business to use the online and digital facilities that the Trader Support Service provides, to ensure that commerce can be as trouble-free commerce as possible across the whole United Kingdom.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con) [V]: My right hon. Friend is at last coming to the European Scrutiny Committee on 8 February. The European Commission outrageously enacted this regulation last week, which even today hypocritically asserts that it would create a hard border through article 16 and, moreover, continues even now the prohibition of the delivery of vaccines from member states to the United Kingdom. Does he accept that this demonstrates that the protocol is not fit for purpose as it stands and that this cannot be resolved without revocation of the regulation itself? Will he take this up with Mr Šefčovič in his meeting tomorrow?

Michael Gove: I look forward to appearing in front of my hon. Friend's Committee next week. He is right: it is important to recognise that the regulation as laid places within the Commission's hands the capacity to restrict exports. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister secured a commitment from the President of the Commission that there would be no interruption in vaccine supplies, but, like my hon. Friend, I deprecate the fact that this regulation was introduced in the first place.

Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP) [V]: First, I express my solidarity with the politicians in Northern Ireland—including, of course, the hon. Members for North Down (Stephen Farry) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—whose offices were attacked last night.

[*Colum Eastwood*]

In Northern Ireland, words can have very dangerous consequences, so does the Cabinet Secretary agree that it is now time for all political leaders to dial down the rhetoric and deal with the actual issues that exist around the protocol, while of course recognising that the protocol is a direct consequence of Britain's leaving the customs union and single market?

Michael Gove: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's expressions of solidarity and I agree with him: politicians and civil leaders from all parties and all parts of society should not have to face that sort of despicable behaviour. He is also right that it is incumbent on us all to seek calmly and purposefully to resolve the issues on the ground. I am grateful to all the parties in the Northern Ireland Executive, and to the First Minister in particular, for the calm and purposeful way in which they have addressed the challenges that we share.

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): The European Commission's actions on Friday were deeply irresponsible. Although the Commission might want to cast them aside as a mistake, they would have had serious implications for the UK and Northern Ireland's place in it.

On vaccines in particular, will my right hon. Friend assure me that whatever action the EU takes, our supply of vaccines to every part of the UK is secure?

Michael Gove: Yes, absolutely—my hon. Friend is completely right. On Friday evening, immediately following the publication of the EU's regulations, the Prime Minister was on the phone to Commission President von der Leyen to make it crystal clear that contracts had to be honoured and there could be no interruption of the supply to the UK during a pandemic of vaccines that had been legally secured in a fair way. The Prime Minister received that absolute assurance; it is just a pity that the Commission acted in such a way in the first place.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance) [V]: First, I thank colleagues for their solidarity in respect of last night's graffiti attack on my office, from which I am currently speaking, and join the wider condemnation of threats to staff at the ports.

Will the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster confirm that violence, or the threat of violence, will not be allowed to influence Government policy, and that the central means of addressing issues relating to the protocol is through the UK and the EU working to address issues, such as by developing a wider veterinary agreement?

Michael Gove: Again, I offer my sympathy to the hon. Gentleman and his staff who have faced this intimidation and graffiti. Members across the House stand fully in solidarity with him. He is right that it is vital that we work to ensure that the real issues are dealt with and that we say and demonstrate that we are not influenced by intimidation, violence or extra-parliamentary action. What we do is in the interests of the people he represents, and I look forward to working with him, his party colleagues and others to make sure that we resolve these questions.

Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con) [V]: The action taken last week follows the EU's track record of a lack of understanding of the sensitivities in Northern

Ireland. We saw it during the Brexit process, with the EU's intransigence about not providing the then Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), with an exit mechanism to the backstop, and we saw it again in the run-up to the protocol, with the EU ignoring our requests for trusted-trader schemes and other flexibilities.

I urge my right hon. Friend to take this discussion out of the purely technical discussions around the Northern Ireland protocol and transform it into a more strategic discussion with the EU. What does the EU need in return from the UK on other fronts to resolve these issues in the long term, and what does the EU need to do to give confidence, particularly to Unionists across Northern Ireland, that it understands that the Good Friday agreement and the protocol are matters of a joint duty of care for both the EU and the UK?

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend is absolutely spot on and makes the central point. People in Northern Ireland will have heard, during the whole Brexit process, professions of care and concern from EU politicians about Northern Ireland. Some of those were sincere, but the way in which the Commission has behaved in the course of the past week is of deep concern. I should say that I absolutely exempt Vice-President Maroš Šefčovič from this: he completely understands the need to make sure that we have a pragmatic resolution to this problem. But not every European politician understands the situation in Northern Ireland anything like as well as my right hon. Friend does, and we do need to make sure that we have a resolution that recognises Northern Ireland's integral place in the UK, while also ensuring that we have the best possible relationship with all our neighbours.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab) [V]: The right hon. Gentleman has just said that he would like to see the grace periods extended, but the Northern Ireland Secretary recently told the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs that

"we are not at the moment in a position where we want to be looking at extending the grace period."

Can the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster therefore explain what Government policy actually is on this? Given that UK supermarkets have expressed grave concerns about having to provide export health certificates for each food item in their lorries heading for Northern Ireland supermarkets, do the proposals that he will be putting to the Joint Committee involve doing away with export health certificates on such goods altogether?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that. We want to work through the Joint Committee to address precisely the issues that he raised. It is important that in that Joint Committee we have a practical, step-by-step analysis of the disruption and difficulties that are currently faced, and we judge which of those issues can best be resolved either through an extension of the grace period or by revisiting the operational aspects of the protocol. The Joint Committee exists for that purpose, and even though his Select Committee no longer exists in its current form, I look forward to having the opportunity to update him and others in the House about the progress that we make.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con) [V]: At such meetings, will my right hon. Friend raise the issue of food producers in Great Britain already having had

their standards approved by the BRCGS, under the global standards for food safety? When they are approved at the place of manufacture, there is no need to check each and every case of food products when they reach Northern Ireland. We could, thus, end the totally unnecessary disruption when they reach those ports and the delays to fresh food.

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: there is no need at all for that level of physical inspection. I will continue to work with those on the ground to reinforce that point.

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab) [V]: Does the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster agree that last Friday's disarray demonstrates the real danger to stability in Northern Ireland of triggering article 16 and the profound uncertainty it would create for businesses? Does he agree that the focus should instead be on making the protocol work and on finding long-term solutions that will avoid disruption caused when the grace period comes to an end and minimise the disruption of trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Michael Gove: I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady that in the hours and days ahead the focus should be on making life better for the people of Northern Ireland by making sure that goods can flow freely and that their lives are not affected in the way that they have been. As I mentioned, it is appropriate to recognise that there may be circumstances in which article 16 may need to be invoked or deployed—it exists for a purpose. However, the Commission invoked it in a way that was completely outside the rule book.

Suzanne Webb (Stourbridge) (Con) [V]: Will my right hon. Friend take this opportunity to confirm that the UK Government will never tolerate any attempt by the European Commission or any other foreign authority to deny the people of Northern Ireland access to the covid vaccines, which this Government have been so successful in securing?

Michael Gove: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend on that. It gives me an opportunity to say thank you to everyone who has been involved in the vaccine roll-out across the UK. Our national health service is a precious aspect of our citizenship of the UK. It is NHS personnel who have been responsible for making sure that our vaccination programme has, so far, gone so well. They deserve the credit and it is the Government's job to make sure that people in Northern Ireland can continue to receive the vaccines that they deserve.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP) [V]: May I extend my appreciation to the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and, indeed, the Prime Minister for their continued engagement in seeking resolutions to what appear to be intractable problems? The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster has helpfully suggested that the grace period for pets, and the work on seeds and plants, can be solved not through continual extensions of those grace periods, but with a practical and workable solution that balances the zero risk associated with those sectors. I also thank him for his comments about the threats and intimidation to the hon. Member for North Down (Stephen Farry), my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford

(Jim Shannon), and Assembly colleagues in east Belfast and north Belfast. What we need to see, and what we need to demonstrate clearly and quickly, is that constitutional politics works, and that we need to get those solutions through constitutional politics.

Michael Gove: I could not agree more. The hon. Gentleman and his party colleagues have been assiduous in bringing to my attention and to the attention of the Secretary of State each of their individual concerns, and they have done so in a speedy, effective and low-key way, which has reflected their desire to resolve these problems. He is absolutely right; we need to see that resolution in order to ensure that people's electoral representatives are heard and are effective.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): As someone who cares passionately about our United Kingdom and Northern Ireland's permanent place within it, does the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster agree that the European Union's willingness to trigger article 16 as soon as it was in its interests clearly undermines its claims during the negotiations that a border in Northern Ireland was not something that it could tolerate? Does he also agree that the Government should now seek to replace the Northern Ireland protocol with the EU because the EU has clearly shown that it was not simply about the interests of Northern Ireland, but more about its own economic and political control? The EU has been shown up for what it really is, and it is time that we put the interests of the United Kingdom and the people of Northern Ireland first.

Michael Gove: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend that we have to put the interests of all the citizens of the United Kingdom, including the citizens of Northern Ireland, absolutely first. I also agree that it was regrettable that just 28 days after the protocol came into effect, it was the EU that decided to trigger article 16 in the way in which it did. I want to work with those in the EU who are genuinely committed to the interests of the people of Northern Ireland, such as Vice-President Maroš Šefčovič, because the most important thing for me now is to do everything I can to help ensure that the lives of people in Northern Ireland are improved. My hon. Friend makes a fair point about the need to take a step back and look at all these issues in the round.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind) [V]: Recently it has been reported that the Ministry of Defence will have to complete customs forms before moving equipment or personnel to Northern Ireland. Can the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster assure us that this will not impede UK military support to the Police Service of Northern Ireland under Operation Helvetic?

Michael Gove: Absolutely. The very idea that the UK armed forces should be prevented in any way from operating in any part of the United Kingdom is utterly unacceptable.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): The whole point of the Northern Ireland protocol was to avoid the creation of a hard border on the island of Ireland; and yet, late last week the European Commission—in an act of stunning hypocrisy—attempted to do exactly that, affecting medicines and critical vaccines. It has blown up in the Commission's face, but if it ever

[Mr Mark Francois]

doubles down and tries it again, the President of the Commission would unquestionably have to resign. In the meantime, will the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster work with Mr Šefčovič in the Joint Committee to try to really rip back these problems? In particular can we narrow down the goods at risk to a very, very small number instead of, as is the case at the moment, virtually everything being treated as if it were at risk, with all the attendant bureaucracy?

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. As I mentioned briefly in my response to the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), the whole point of the Joint Committee is that it is there to safeguard the interests of the people of Northern Ireland; it is not there to ensure that we can somehow control the export of vaccines from Belgium and the Netherlands. That is not appropriate. His broader point is absolutely right: we do need to make sure that we work rapidly within the Joint Committee to address those issues, and, once we have done so, take a step back and look at how we can safeguard Northern Ireland's position in the round.

Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab) [V]: Does the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster agree that the protocol is the best way to ensure stability in Northern Ireland and that it must work for businesses and communities? Does he therefore also agree that further joint steps are needed with the European Union to reduce the potential mountain of red tape on food products when the grace period ends in April?

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. We must make that progress.

Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con) [V]: How can my right hon. Friend reassure my constituents in Lincoln and all Northern Ireland citizens that article 16 is not triggered as lightly by the European Commission in the future? It took less than a month for it to be triggered, with little realisation of the potential ramifications by anonymous foolish actors in the European Commission, but thankfully ministerial colleagues, including the Prime Minister, saw to it that the European Commission made a swift U-turn on this occasion. Do the Government intend to revisit the arrangements, as after recent events this would be a justified request?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. One can never predict the future with accuracy, but I think, given the universal condemnation with which the Commission's actions were met, that it knows that it has to step away. It is remarkable; the Archbishop of Canterbury, Carl Bildt, Alexander Stubb—the former Finnish Prime Minister—all the parties in Northern Ireland, the Taoiseach and the Irish Foreign Minister were all critical of the decision that was made. This is not some sort of gaggle of Eurosceptics rehearsing traditional lines—it is a recognition that the Commission mucked up.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con) [V]: The Joint Committee is empowered to determine the practical arrangements relating to the UK's implementation of

the protocol. Given this morning's need to suspend animal-based food checks at the port of Larne because of paramilitary threats, it is clear that these decisions have real physical consequences. What conversations has my right hon. Friend been able to have with his counterparts in the Joint Committee on the practical steps not only to de-escalate the situation but to ensure that food supplies are maintained and eased in future?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I had the opportunity to talk to Vice-President Šefčovič over the course of the weekend, on Friday night and on Saturday afternoon as well. As I mentioned earlier, he is very conscious of these questions. Although criticisms might be directed at some, he should be exempt from criticism because he is absolutely committed to working to resolve these issues in a practical way.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP) [V]: I join others in the House today in condemning the attacks on the parliamentary office of the hon. Member for North Down (Stephen Farry) and indeed my own party colleagues.

The Minister will know that Unionism is looking closely at how the Government address our very valid and principled opposition to the protocol. These are not teething problems, and the Chair of the Northern Ireland Committee should desist from using such dismissive language. Does the Minister agree that continuing to ignore one section of our community would be reckless when the foundation of political progress in Northern Ireland, which I want to see protected, is predicated on cross-community consent? Does he also agree that as the mechanics of east-west are broken by this protocol, it is inconceivable that north-south mechanics will continue to operate with the consent of the wider Unionist community?

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady makes a very important point. In reflecting on the gains that have been made since the Belfast agreement was secured, we need to recognise that that agreement underpins the principle of consent. It made certain that Northern Ireland's place in the United Kingdom would be respected by all. It requires respect for every citizen in Northern Ireland, all communities, and all traditions. As a committed Unionist and as a Government who are committed to the United Kingdom, it is vital we demonstrate that daily. That is why appropriate action needs to be taken of the kind we outlined earlier. Every day, UK Government officials, national health service doctors and nurses, and people working in every aspect of government are working to serve the people of Northern Ireland as UK citizens. That is absolutely integral to the mission of this Government. I look forward to working with her and her colleagues to make sure that we move forward in the right way.

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

1.20 pm

Sitting suspended.

Covid-19 Update

1.23 pm

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): I rise to make a statement on the fightback against coronavirus.

Across the country, our vaccine roll-out continues at pace. With each vaccine we administer, we are one step closer to normal. As of today, we have vaccinated 9.2 million people. I thank everyone involved in this collective national effort that saw nearly 1 million people get vaccinated last weekend alone, or, to put it another way, one in 60 of all the adults in the UK. We have now protected almost nine out of every 10 people over 80 and half of people in their 70s. I am delighted that we have been able to visit every eligible care home, 10,307 in total. I want to thank everyone involved in that effort, including the NHS, our dedicated staff in social care, and the residents themselves, too, for coming forward. I pay tribute to the Minister for Care, who has worked so hard to help us meet this ambitious target.

I know that many of us in this House are playing our part in the national vaccination effort. Today, we published a new resource for the House that provides more information on the vaccine roll-out and how all colleagues can play an important part in increasing the take-up of the vaccine in their area, because the take-up will directly impact how effective the vaccines are and how fast we can safely get out of this.

We are confident we have the supplies to meet our target to offer the vaccine to the four most vulnerable groups by 15 February. We now have over 400 million doses of vaccine on order, including the additional 40 million doses from Valneva that we ordered yesterday. That we find ourselves in this position is no accident. Our strategy has been to invest early and invest at risk. We have backed many horses, no matter where they are from, and we have also built up our vaccine manufacturing capability here at home.

As a result, today we have the AstraZeneca jab being manufactured in Oxford, Staffordshire and Wrexham, the Novavax vaccine made in Teesside and the Valneva vaccine manufactured in Livingston in Scotland. It is a great example of what we can achieve together, working as one United Kingdom.

Despite this optimistic backdrop, we must continue to act with caution, not least because of the renewed challenges posed by new variants of the coronavirus. We have found here 105 cases of the variant first identified in South Africa, including 11 cases that do not appear to have any links to international travel. As with the variant first identified here in the UK, there is currently no evidence to suggest it is any more severe, but we have to come down on it hard. Our mission must be to stop its spread altogether and break those chains of transmission.

In those areas where this variant has been found—parts of Broxbourne, London, Maidstone, Southport, Walsall and Woking—we are putting in extra testing and sequencing every positive test. Working with local authorities, we are going door to door to test everyone in those areas. Mobile testing units will be deployed, offering polymerase chain reaction tests to people who have to leave their home for work or other essential reasons. We have also seen 11 cases of mutations of concern in Bristol and 32 in

Liverpool and are taking the same approach. In all these areas, it is imperative that people stay at home and only leave home where it is absolutely essential.

When your local authority offers you a test, you should take up the offer, because we know that around one in three people with coronavirus has no symptoms, but can still pass it on. We are offering testing to everyone aged 16 and over, even if they have been vaccinated. If you live in one of those areas, but have not been contacted and are unsure whether you should have a test, I encourage you to visit your local authority website to find out.

Anyone who must leave home—to go to a workplace, for instance, because they cannot work from home—should get tested. All local employers should support and encourage their workers to get tested. The message is more important than ever: stay at home, maintain social distancing and get tested.

Across the whole country, we are expanding workplace testing, including here in Parliament. This morning, Mr Speaker, you and I together visited the new covid testing site in Parliament, which offers all those who work here—peers, MPs and staff—the chance to get tested. I took a test this morning—it was, thankfully, negative. It is quick and easy and you get the result back fast. I encourage colleagues who have to be here in person to sign up and do the same.

For all of us, no matter where we live, we need to continue to follow the rules, because while more scientific work is under way to learn more about new variants, we know with absolute certainty that social distancing works. It denies the virus the social contact it needs to spread. We must all keep at it. We have sacrificed too much—and come so far with the vaccine—to give up now. I know that we will not.

While we have been working night and day to fight coronavirus, I have often drawn inspiration from our fight against another killer pandemic, HIV, a disease that also took too many people before their time.

This is National HIV Testing Week. It is a reminder of how important it is to get your free HIV test, but it is also a reminder of the progress we have made in tackling that terrible pandemic that we can credibly commit to no new transmissions by the end of this decade. Today I am sure the whole House will join me in wishing Lord Norman Fowler a very happy 83rd birthday. He was an inspirational Health Secretary and a fearless advocate for tackling HIV and AIDS. Lord Fowler is someone who knows the importance of taking action early and the power of testing to turn the tide.

As we face these difficult weeks ahead, we can all draw inspiration from that great struggle and know that even when faced with a mountain of challenges, science, ingenuity and the sheer power of will can see us to better days ahead. I commend this statement to the House.

1.30 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful, as always, to the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. I thank you, Mr Speaker, for putting in place the arrangements for testing on the estate. I am sure that Members and, crucially, staff on the estate are extremely grateful for that initiative. I also extend my best wishes to the Lord Speaker on his birthday today.

[Jonathan Ashworth]

The news that the South African variant has been identified in eight different local authority areas is alarming and suggests significant community transmission. Can I just ask the Secretary of State to run through the timelines? When did these 11 cases test positive, and how long does the genetic sequencing take? When was he told of the cases? Can these processes be made speedier? I am told, for example, that the Ealing case tested positive in late December.

The variants bring into focus the importance of border controls. Times Radio reports that hotel quarantine arrangements will not be in place until 15 February. Why the delay? According to *The Times*, the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies warned two weeks ago that tougher quarantine restrictions for everyone entering the UK were needed. The Government dispute that interpretation, so will the Secretary of State publish the SAGE minutes from 21 January?

I welcome the extra testing, but may I suggest the Secretary of State goes further, because people move beyond their postcode boundaries? They go shopping and many still have to go to work. Will he therefore roll out testing in neighbouring postcodes? He wants to come down hard on this variant, but is not the lesson of mass testing, such as in Liverpool, that people are hesitant to take a test if they are not compensated for any loss of income associated with self-isolation? We are fighting this virus with one hand tied behind our back, asking the low paid to go hungry in order not to spread the virus. Transmission chains will not be broken without decent sick pay and isolation support.

We have seen the Kent B117 variant spread with speed. Public Health England's latest technical briefing reports that B117 sequences with the E484K mutation seen in the South African variant have now been identified. That is very worrying, because this is the mutation thought to be behind the partial vaccine evasion. Surely that suggests that further action will be needed. For example, Germany, Austria and France are recommending FFP2 face masks on public transport and in shops. The Chair of the Select Committee, the right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt) has also suggested that. Will the Secretary of State now review the evidence and look at that measure?

On vaccination, I again congratulate the NHS. Not all care homes have been vaccinated—those with a covid outbreak have not, for understandable reasons—but will the Secretary of State tell us how many such care homes are outstanding? There have been reports of some care staff turning down vaccination, so can he tell us how many care staff have been vaccinated? Will he ensure that the NHS collects data on the numbers turning down vaccination, so that we can target and overcome the vaccine hesitancy more effectively?

Public health services have an important role in tackling vaccine hesitancy. When will public health directors know their allocations for the next financial year? UNICEF has warned:

“Children are not the face of this pandemic. But they risk being among its biggest victims”.

I accept it was inevitable that schools would close given community transmission levels, but that does not make it any less devastating. We are depriving young people of social interaction and of play with their friends. Learning is not the same and mental health problems

are increasing. There will be children in homes where there is violence or where drink abuse or substance misuse is prevalent.

Children's health must always be a priority. On current plans, how many teachers will be vaccinated as part of bands 5 to 9, and how many teachers and support staff will have to wait until the period between Easter and summer to be vaccinated? Last September, it was reported that 25,000 teachers had been off sick related to covid, further disrupting children's learning, so how can the Secretary of State ensure that we do not see the same disruption again from March when it is hoped that schools will return?

Finally, this is indeed National HIV Testing Week. Over the weekend, I binge-watched “It's a Sin”, and I was in tears. Thankfully, HIV is not a death sentence today. People living with HIV are in phase 6 for vaccination, but only if they have disclosed their HIV status to their GP. Many have not and still do not want to because of the stigma that we saw portrayed in “It's a Sin”, so will the Secretary of State ensure that people living with HIV are able to access vaccination at their HIV clinic?

Matt Hancock: To answer the hon. Gentleman's many questions, he is absolutely right to raise the importance of coming down hard on the cases of new variants that we have discovered here in the UK. These are cases that have been seen over the past two months. The action that we are putting into place is to make sure that we stop further spread, and further spread in the community, alongside the action taken to ensure that there is no spread from those who have a history of international travel. As he knows, we have brought in tougher action at the border and we stand ready to do more.

The hon. Gentleman asks for the SAGE minutes to be published. They are published regularly. He also asks about the neighbouring postcodes to those where a new variant case has been found, where it is a new variant of concern. We absolutely do that where it is epidemiologically sensible. For instance, if the case is found on the border of a postcode, obviously we go across that border. We also investigate linked premises—for instance, if somebody had a child at a school or is going to work in a particular workplace—and, working with the director of public health, we will ensure that testing is directed there as well.

The hon. Gentleman raises the issue of isolation payments. We have the £500 isolation payment in place, so nobody should, as he put it, go hungry because they have to isolate. What is critical in these areas is that people stay at home unless they absolutely have to go out. It is imperative that people follow the rules to get these new variants completely under control.

He asks about the care home success. I am delighted that we have been able to reach so many care homes. I said in my statement that we have reached 10,307 care homes in England. There are 110 care homes where the vaccination programme is still outstanding because they have had outbreaks and, for clinical reasons, the vaccination programme cannot start there, but it will as soon as it is clinically possible.

The hon. Gentleman also asks about the data being shared from the vaccination programme. That data is now routinely shared with local directors of public health, precisely for the reasons that he set out—so we can reach more parts.

Finally, he ends on the question of education. Of course we understand how challenging the impact of this lockdown is on those with children who have to be schooled at home. That is why the Prime Minister said that schools should be the first thing to open when it is safe and possible to do so. Sadly, that time is not yet, but the more that we all follow the rules that we have set out so clearly, the quicker that time will come.

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con) [V]: I thank the Health Secretary for liaising with me on the issues in Surrey over the weekend, where the actions taken by him and the outstanding leader of Surrey County Council, Tim Oliver, are absolutely right. My right hon. Friend mentioned that, at the weekend, we reached the milestone of offering the vaccine to everyone in care homes, except for where there has been an outbreak. Does he agree that we should crown that tremendous achievement by making 2021 a year as significant for the social care sector as 1948 was for the NHS—the year it was founded—with a long-term financial settlement implementing Dilnot and setting it up for the future with a 10-year plan?

Matt Hancock: My right hon. Friend knows that we set out in our manifesto, committed in the manifesto and were elected on a manifesto to resolve the long-standing problems in social care. The Prime Minister has set out to the Liaison Committee, of which my right hon. Friend is a member, the timetable on which he hopes that we are able to deliver that commitment. Alongside dealing with this pandemic, we are working to deliver our manifesto commitments, whether on social care or the 40 new hospitals or the 50,000 more nurses. I look forward to being held to account by the Select Committee on Health and Social Care on those commitments.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP) [V]: I associate myself with the Secretary of State's comments on HIV test week, but it is concerning to hear that over 100 cases of the South African variant have been detected in the UK, particularly as they do not represent a single outbreak, but are widely scattered across England. The concern, of course, is that while current vaccines will still give a significant degree of protection, this variant's resistance to some covid antibodies could reduce their effectiveness, so does he plan to tighten internal travel restrictions to avoid it spreading across the UK as happened with the Kent variant?

Will there be increased random genomic testing of PCR specimens outwith those areas to identify just how widespread it already is? Unfortunately, this is shutting the barn door after the horse has bolted. The Government have been aware of the concern about this variant for some time, and the SAGE advisory group warned that limited travel bans would not be enough to keep out new covid variants and that the only way to stop them would be mandatory quarantine for all arrivals, so why did the Government choose not to follow that advice? This variant is already present in many countries and new, more resistant covid variants could evolve anywhere in the world, so will the Government reconsider their very minimal quarantine plan and extend it to all incoming travellers? As new strains brought in through holiday travel last year contributed to the second wave of covid, is the Prime Minister seriously suggesting that people should go abroad on holiday this summer?

Matt Hancock: What the SNP spokeswoman failed to mention is that it is only because we built the huge genomic surveillance capacity that we now have, which is available right across the UK, that we have been able to spot these variants of concern. This is a critical point, because those sorts of variation happen everywhere, but the challenge is to spot them as soon as we can and act on them.

The hon. Lady asked about travel. We already have in place rules against all non-essential travel, with clear "stay local" guidance. We also have mandatory isolation for new arrivals, so yes, we have tightened in response to the new evidence that she mentioned, but she did not also mention the fact that it is only because the vaccine programme is rolling out so rapidly across the whole UK that we are able to protect people against the old variant, which of course is the most widespread, in combination with the variant discovered in Kent. That is the way that we will get out of this situation. It is a UK programme, and we are enthusiastic and willing, from the UK Government point of view, to do everything we possibly can to support that roll-out, including all the way across Scotland, to make sure that people in Scotland and every other part of this United Kingdom can get their job as soon as possible.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con) [V]: I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend and to the vaccines Minister, my hon. Friend Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), for the work they have done on vaccines. Will my right hon. Friend thank Essex Council, NHS staff and volunteers in Harlow who have, so far, vaccinated many thousands of residents?

Public Health England has said that adults over 18 with learning disabilities are at greater risk of dying than most people aged 65 to 74. International studies show that if someone is learning disabled aged 55 to 64, death rates are comparable to those for people aged over 80. My right hon. Friend will have seen the parliamentary petition on this, signed by many thousands, so will he work with the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation to move the adult learning disabled high up the priority list for vaccinations?

Matt Hancock: I pay tribute to all those working in Harlow, including at the Harlow mass vaccination site, and also to the GPs and the pharmacists who are working so hard to vaccinate people right across Harlow.

On the question of the JCVI ordering and the prioritisation for vaccination, as my right hon. Friend knows, I think the best approach is to take the clinical advice and to follow that clinical advice. The sorts of considerations that he raises are an important part of the JCVI deliberations. I know it has looked very closely at the subject he raises. What matters now that it has made and published its decision is that we drive through the vaccination programme to get through as many of those groups as possible, and I am very pleased to see the hundreds of thousands of new vaccinations that are taking place every day.

Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab) [V]: SAGE warned about the dangers of the South Africa strain weeks ago, but the Prime Minister dragged his feet, and he has now decided on a partial quarantine arrangement that SAGE has already warned will be ineffective in preventing further introduction of this variant. Is it not the case

[*Dame Angela Eagle*]

that, once again, the Government have acted too little and too late to stop the spread of this new and dangerous variant in the UK?

Matt Hancock: No, on the contrary, we removed the travel corridors to ensure there is a self-isolation requirement that is mandatory for all those who are coming to this country. Protecting this country from new variants coming from abroad is important, hence we have taken the action swiftly, and we did that on the basis of the scientific evidence.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Could I commend the Health Secretary for the difficult and brave but correct decisions he made early on in the pandemic in relation to vaccines, which have led today to Britain having a world-leading vaccine roll-out? Could I also draw his attention to NHS Northamptonshire, which, thanks to the very hard work of all the local staff and volunteers, has one of the very best vaccine roll-out programmes in the whole country?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I have been watching the progress of those at NHS Northamptonshire, who are going great guns, and I know they are working incredibly hard. This does not happen by magic; it happens by hard graft, especially of the GPs and the pharmacists, and the support teams and the volunteers, who are doing such a great job in Northants.

I am very grateful for what my hon. Friend has said. We did take decisions at risk early, before we knew whether they were going to come off, and knowing that we would be criticised if it did not work out. However, that meant we could get those contracts signed ahead of many other places, and it means that we will be able to deliver vaccines for UK citizens and then, of course, play our part in ensuring that everybody across the world can have access to this life-saving vaccine, too.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab) [V]: The Government's catastrophic mishandling of the virus has meant that, in the past month, there were over 32,000 covid deaths in the UK, an average of more than 1,000 a day. In New Zealand there were zero, in Vietnam zero, in Australia zero and in Taiwan one. The difference is that these countries pursued a zero-covid strategy—suppressing cases, saving lives and reopening economies. The vaccine offers hope, but so long as the virus circulates, there is a risk of thousands of more deaths and, now, of more dangerous new variants. Does the Secretary of State regret his Government's decision not to pursue a zero-covid strategy, and will he now commit to this strategy?

Matt Hancock: All countries that have attempted a zero-covid strategy have found that this virus transmits and gets round the boundaries that have been put in place. There were parts of this country that tried a strategy of zero, and in fact we were urged to do so in this House, but what matters is making sure that we get the tools that are going to be used permanently for us to get through this, and that we get them deployed as fast as possible. That means testing, with the hundreds of testing sites that are now available and, crucially, it means getting this vaccine rolled out. The hon. Member

said the vaccine offers hope, and I think that is where we should all focus—on getting this vaccine rolled out as quickly as we possibly can.

Rob Roberts (Delyn) (Con): The Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board in north Wales has had some difficulties over a number of years, and it was not surprising that there was a collective sharp intake of breath, and mutterings of “here we go again”, when the vaccine got off to a bit of a faltering start in north Wales. My colleagues and I have been in constant contact with the health board, and are pleased to report that things are now back on track. It is making good progress, and is very confident of being able to hit the target of vaccinating the first four groups by the middle of February. Will my right hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to the staff of the health board, and to the legions of volunteers, the armed forces, and all those involved in that process who are doing such a fantastic job in north Wales?

Matt Hancock: That is close to my heart, Madam Deputy Speaker, and across the UK people have done extraordinary things and worked incredibly hard to deliver this vaccine roll-out. We have been working as hard as we possibly can as a United Kingdom to support the NHS in Wales, including north Wales, and in Scotland and Northern Ireland, to ensure that the vaccine is delivered as safely and rapidly as possible to all parts of these islands.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): It is wonderful to see so many people being vaccinated so quickly, and it shows the value of investing in the right people, in the right place, at the right time, and of using our national health service GPs and local public health professionals. The vaccination is not the end of the story. Social distancing will continue to play its part, as will test, trace, isolate and support, and new variants threaten to take us back to square one. Will the Secretary of State learn the obvious lessons from this Government's failures and successes, put local health teams in charge of test and trace with the proper funding they need, and fix the broken system of support, including the £500 payments and those not entitled to statutory sick pay, as quickly as possible?

Matt Hancock: I take all that as a compliment. The £500 payment is incredibly important in supporting people on low incomes, as is the huge roll-out of test and trace, with more than 90% of contacts now identified and contacted by NHS Test and Trace, which is doing a magnificent job. Of course, the roll-out of the vaccine is going rapidly, and this weekend, one in 60 of all adults in the country got a jab, which is testament to that. We are always looking to improve and learn lessons wherever we can, but I am glad that things are making the progress they are.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): I echo what the Secretary of State said about HIV. Binge-watching “It's a Sin” is five hours well spent on a reminder of how close we are to that magic zero transmission. The Government's acceptance last week that the release of our society, rightly starting with our schools, should move in lockstep with the success of the vaccine roll-out, was welcome. Will the Secretary of State assure parents that we will follow an increasing number of countries

around Europe, and in the UK, and stick to that as the vulnerable groups, and those liable to overwhelm the NHS, are protected?

Matt Hancock: Yes, of course.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD) [V]: With the Prince's Trust reporting a record high of more than half of young people often feeling anxious, and some A&Es reporting daily seeing children coming in after self-harming or overdosing, it is clear that the pandemic is taking an enormous toll on children and young people's mental health and wellbeing due to school closures, family pressures, social isolation, and bereavement. Will the Secretary of State commit today, in children's mental health week, urgently to form a cross-departmental plan for tackling the impact of the pandemic on the mental health of children and young people?

Matt Hancock: We have put a significant amount of extra funding into supporting children's mental health alongside adult mental health. We know that one of the consequences of the lockdown, which is absolutely necessary, is that it puts significant pressure on mental health services. We have seen the increased burden on those services, and it is very important that people get the support they need.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): May I add my congratulations to those who have been rolling out the vaccine? I listened carefully to what my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) said, and I want to put on record my thanks to those in Gloucestershire, which, as of last Thursday, was the top performing part of the country. Hereford and Worcestershire next door was the second highest performing part, which kind of makes them the highest-performing roll-outs in the whole of the western world. I thank the Secretary of State for his help and that fantastic performance.

I want to take the Secretary of State back to his answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine). The whole point of the vaccine roll-out is to ensure that we protect the vulnerable, reduce the death toll and reduce hospitalisations and the pressure on the health service. Given that the vaccine roll-out is going so well and is, I suspect, ahead of where the Secretary of State thought it would be, will he confirm that when schools start going back on 8 March, it will be those two metrics falling—deaths and hospitalisations—that will guide the reopening of not just schools but the rest of the economy?

Matt Hancock: The Prime Minister has set out four metrics that we will follow. Deaths and hospitalisations are two of them, and they are both incredibly important. We expect deaths to fall faster than hospitalisations, because older people who are higher up in the JCVI cohorts are more likely to die by a greater degree than they are more likely to use hospital beds. The other two considerations are that we do not see further new variants that put all this at risk and, of course, that the vaccination programme rolls out well. I would not say that the vaccination programme is ahead of plans. I would say that it is on track; I make no further claim than that.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his and his Department's wisdom and forethought in securing the vaccine for all of the United

Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—better together; I always say that, and it is the truth. As some Members will remember, the last smallpox outbreak in the UK was in the 1970s and was combated by health workers doing door-to-door testing. I understand the rationale behind that decision. What discussions has his Department had with the Treasury to secure additional financial support to enable each devolved Administration to carry out similar schemes if the need arises in every part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Matt Hancock: We of course stand ready to put in place financial support for the devolved nations, should that be needed to tackle outbreaks such as this. We have a constant conversation with the devolved authorities. For instance, I speak to Robin Swann, the Health Minister in Northern Ireland, on a regular basis. I was talking to him on Saturday morning about the supply of vaccines, as the hon. Gentleman might imagine. It is something that we work very closely together on.

The fundamental point that the hon. Gentleman makes is absolutely right: it is by working together as one United Kingdom that we are managing to do this on vaccines. If we want a shining example of why this country performs so well when we work together, we just need to look to the vaccine programme being rolled out in every corner of the country, in every locality, with all nations working together in a single combined mission. It is a celebrated example of why this country works well when we are better together.

Sir Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale West) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for repeating his commitment to ensuring that schools can reopen as soon as it is safe to do so. As he reflects on that, will he keep in his mind the sobering words of Professor Russell Viner, the president of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, who said to the Education Committee that when we close schools, we close children's lives, and went on to refer to 75 international studies that suggest significant mental health damage for children? Will he reiterate the huge importance of putting children's mental health and wellbeing alongside the other onerous responsibilities that he bears?

Matt Hancock: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. The Royal College of Psychiatrists has been clear in describing the negative impact of school closures and also the negative impact of the virus getting out of control. The challenge we have is to try to mitigate both those problems, and it is the vaccine that is the best way through.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): I start by thanking our amazing NHS staff, and especially those working in the Aneurin Bevan health board here in south-east Wales, for their amazing work throughout the pandemic. Will the Secretary of State update the House on any conversations he may have had with the pharmaceutical companies about the need to modify the vaccine in the light of the new variants?

Matt Hancock: We are working with pharmaceutical companies and the scientists to understand whether and where such modifications are needed and how they can be brought to use on the frontline as quickly as is

[*Matt Hancock*]

safely possible. That is obviously an important consideration given the new variants that we have seen. We have confidence that, should modifications to vaccines be necessary in large scale, they will be available more quickly than the original vaccines and, just as the first time round, when we got in there early and bought at risk, we are having conversations right now with the pharmaceutical companies to ensure that we are right at the front.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con) [V]: There have been scare stories in Lancashire about vaccines being diverted to elsewhere in the country, causing a shortage and perpetuating further urban myths. Will the Secretary of State assure me and the House that my constituents will be covered, that vaccines are not being redirected to other regions of the UK, and that Lancashire will continue to receive the required proportions in the future, safeguarding my constituents?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I can give my hon. Friend that absolute assurance. Of course, the supply of vaccines is the rate-limiting step. We have seen the strain on vaccine supply from some of the things that have happened over the past week, and some weeks the supply is greater than in others. The website shows the daily move in the overall supply across the country as a whole. Lancashire will get its fair share and get enough to be able to deliver on the target of the offer to everybody in cohorts 1 to 4 by 15 February. I have looked closely specifically into the figures for the north-west, and it is getting its fair share. I can give my hon. Friend the assurance that the reports circulating on the internet do not come from credible sources.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab) [V]: I add my congratulations to the workers in the NHS who are delivering the roll-out of the vaccine. Reopening schools will be a major step towards returning to some form of normality for young people in particular, but the presence of the new variant is likely to create some anxiety among staff. To minimise the disruption to education when we return and to create some confidence among staff when they are asked to go back into schools in large numbers, does the Secretary of State agree that we should plan to vaccinate school staff if at all possible before half-term, if not during it?

Matt Hancock: The challenge with the proposal the hon. Gentleman puts forward is that vaccinating those who are not as vulnerable to the disease before those who are more vulnerable would essentially increase the overall clinical vulnerability to the disease. I am glad that the hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) did not raise this issue as health spokesman on the Labour Front Bench, although I know others on the Labour Front Bench do so. We have to follow the clinical order of priority, because my priority is saving lives.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con) [V]: Further to the Prime Minister's suggestion yesterday in Batley that we may not see a return to different regional tier restrictions due to the virus's behaviour, how will the Government avoid unfairly disadvantaging areas with low covid rates?

Or does the fantastic vaccination programme roll-out mean that the whole country can now make steady progress out of lockdown together?

Matt Hancock: That is our goal—that the whole country can make steady progress together. In fact, case rates across the UK are more similar in all parts of the UK than they have been for some time. There were significant regional variations over the autumn, but that is much less widespread now, hence the comments that the Prime Minister made yesterday.

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab) [V]: The Secretary of State will know that I have written to him several times recently on the subject of the gut microbiome, which the immune system heavily depends on, and its impact on covid-19. Will he meet me to discuss the emerging research, including on the use of prebiotics and probiotics, and positive mitigation of the impact of the worst effects of covid-19, helping people to suffer less and saving the NHS money?

Matt Hancock: I am very happy for either me or one of my team to meet the hon. Lady to discuss this issue and make sure that it is looked into properly.

Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con) [V]: The development, production and roll-out of vaccines in Britain is increasingly envied across the world, and the Wockhardt factory in north Wales is playing its part in that process. What plans does my right hon. Friend have to increase the production of vaccines in the UK further, both to meet our own needs and to allow us to assist our friends in the Republic of Ireland and elsewhere?

Matt Hancock: The onshoring of vaccine manufacturing is an incredibly important part of our strategy. We were previously very, very good at the research and at the regulation of vaccines, but onshore manufacturing was sparse. We have built that manufacturing capability, including at Wockhardt on the Wrexham industrial estate, as my hon. Friend mentioned, and also now with production in Scotland, Teesside and elsewhere, with more to come. It is a strategic choice that this country should make that we should bring onshore the manufacturing in critical industries and of critical products such as vaccines, not least because there is not going to be a global glut of vaccine manufacturing capability for a long time to come. We are at the forefront of the science, and we should be at the forefront of the manufacturing and production.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP) [V]: Dr Wendy Jones, who operates the drugs in breastmilk helpline, is continuing to get queries from people who have been told that they cannot get the vaccination if they are breastfeeding, so could I ask the Secretary of State to make it absolutely crystal clear that there is not a contraindication and that those who are breastfeeding should get the covid vaccination?

Matt Hancock: I will ensure that the chief medical officer writes to the hon. Lady setting out the precise clinical details of this point, because while she is right, I do not want to opine on the clinical points; I want to make sure that that comes from the top doctor in the land.

Matt Vickers (Stockton South) (Con): A huge debt of gratitude is owed to all those involved in our incredible, world-leading vaccination programme, including Teesside's hospital, our primary care network and the Fairfield pharmacy, which was one of the first pharmacy-based vaccination hubs around. Can my right hon. Friend confirm when Teesside will benefit from a mass vaccination site, so that we can get more jabs into the arms of Teessiders as soon as possible?

Matt Hancock: The performance of people on Teesside in getting the jab rolled out so fast has been absolutely magnificent—particularly, but not only, in Stockton-on-Tees, and I am not just saying that because it was my hon. Friend who asked me that question. It has been a really impressive performance and I am very happy to look into when we might be able to open a Teesside mass vaccination centre, but what I can say is that across Teesside the roll-out is going well and I am grateful to everybody who is coming forward so enthusiastically to get the jab.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab) [V]: May I join the Secretary of State in congratulating those in my constituency who have worked so hard on rolling out the vaccine? At the moment, in Rochdale, as in other areas, people are given roughly a week's notice of the quantity and the type of vaccine that they will receive. As a way of working, that is fine for the first round of vaccinations. When we come to the second round, though, can flexibility be built in so that those responsible for delivering the vaccine know which vaccine and how many vaccinations they will get, so that they can ensure that those second vaccines are the ones that are needed?

Matt Hancock: I absolutely understand the point that the hon. Gentleman makes and I join him in what he says. I understand why people who are delivering the vaccine on the ground want to know those forecasts. The challenge is that the supply schedule is lumpy. We do not want to give certainty inaccurately: we do not want to imply that there is certainty where there is no certainty. There is certainty, though, in the fact that we have a high degree of confidence that the second doses will be available and, of course, will be distributed according to need, with the right vaccine for the right second dose going to the right place—we have a full record of that. The second dosing starts in earnest in a couple of months' time—obviously, 12 weeks on from 4 January, when we shifted the dosing on to a 12-week schedule. We have the logistics under way to ensure that people get access to the right dose to match the first dose that they had. I am very happy to talk to him further if he has any more questions about the logistics of getting this sorted.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con) [V]: More than 400 people were vaccinated at the new pharmacy-led vaccination centre at Honley village hall yesterday. The new vaccination centre at John Smith's Stadium in Huddersfield is also open, as Yorkshire continues to lead the way with the vaccine roll-out. Will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking our NHS, the independent community pharmacy involved, and our wonderful community volunteers, who are all part of this great national effort?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I will. The vaccination effort right across Yorkshire has been absolutely fantastic, including in West Yorkshire, which my hon. Friend represents, and in South Yorkshire. Yorkshire has just pulled this one out of the bag. We will deliver on that offer to everybody in the top four vulnerable categories by 15 February—in just under two weeks' time. Then we will get on and vaccinate all the others who are in the vulnerable cohorts. I know that it is hard work, but it is so uplifting. I am really glad to see that happening right across Yorkshire.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab) [V]: In answer to my written question to the Home Office, I was informed that Border Force does not hold records of the number of staff who have tested positive for covid-19 in the past 12 months. We have seen the DVLA in Swansea unable to give the Transport Committee the correct number of staff who tested positive for covid-19 let alone a breakdown by Department. What conversations is the Secretary of State having with his Cabinet colleagues and Government agencies to ensure the safety of essential civil servants who are unable to work from home?

Matt Hancock: We are having those conversations all the time. In fact, I spoke to both the Home Secretary and the Transport Secretary about this issue yesterday, ensuring that we have widespread workplace testing available for all civil servants right across the UK.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): I come with good news from Wealden: the vaccination programme is working at a fantastic pace in my care homes and across the constituency. I come also with thanks to my right hon. Friend and to his leadership from lots of people across Wealden. So I thank him very much, but a Minister's job is never done. Now I am being flooded by messages from parents, grandparents and teachers who want no further delays to school openings, so any assurances would be welcome. Furthermore, as we know that the lockdown has had an impact on our children's mental health, health and educational attainment, is research being undertaken by the Department so that we can be ready to offer full wrap-around care for our young people when lockdown is over?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Before the Secretary of State answers, I should gently remind the House that we still have almost 25 people to go, so brief questions and answers would be appreciated.

Matt Hancock: We want to provide as much support as possible. I am really glad that the vaccine roll-out is going well in Wealden and thank everybody who is playing their part in that.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab) [V]: Why does it not make sense for teachers and other essential frontline workers to be vaccinated before perfectly fit and healthy people—like us, Madam Deputy Speaker—in their 60s?

Matt Hancock: Because people in their 60s are more likely to die from covid than people who are younger.

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): Our world-leading vaccines programme will mean that deaths and hospitalisations for serious ill health will fall massively—probably to normal levels by around 8 March, when the top four priority groups will have been vaccinated. I am

[Adam Afriyie]

glad to hear the Secretary of State confirm that our top priority must be to open schools first and then move on, because parents are desperate to have schools opened, teachers want schools opened, businesses want schools opened and—God bless them—even our children are desperate to have schools opened. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that schools will be the first to reopen on or before 8 March?

Matt Hancock: I can confirm what the Prime Minister has set out: schools will be the first in the queue for reopening. We will consider the data in the middle of this month, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will set out a statement after that, and we will give two weeks' notice. Schools will not open before 8 March, and of course we will look at the data, as I set out in a previous answer.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC) [V]: The Health Minister in Wales has now admitted, at last, that many lives could have been saved had the Welsh Labour Government locked down sooner last year. Does the Secretary of State believe that an earlier general lockdown in England would have saved many lives? If so, how does that belief inform the quarantine and lockdown decisions that his Government now face?

Matt Hancock: We have taken action very rapidly when we have seen rises in cases. The most recent example here in England was, of course, right at the start of this year, when we saw the sharp spike in cases and took very rapid action to close schools after some of them had been open for just one day. We do not take such measures lightly and we understand the impact that they have, but they were absolutely necessary.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend and the entire team on doing such a phenomenal job in rolling out the life-saving vaccine right throughout the country. It is not, though, in our interest or indeed our character to become a vaccinated island; we have both the means and the desire to help others who do not have such advanced public health infrastructure systems as ours. We are heavily involved in COVAX, Gavi and the encouraging of global vaccine disbursement, but I invite the Secretary of State to go a step further and work with the Secretary of State for Defence and the Foreign Secretary to allocate overseas funds to create an international vaccination taskforce, utilising RFA Argus, our hospital ship, and other military assets to assist practically with the international roll-out of vaccines to developing countries. The UK set an example by stepping forward during the Ebola crisis; I hope we can do the same again today.

Matt Hancock: I would be happy to talk to the Secretary of State for Defence about that idea, because we are leaning into the global vaccination effort, not just with the funding to COVAX and Gavi that my right hon. Friend mentioned but with practical support—including, of course, the Oxford vaccine itself, which is the most deployable vaccine and the only one currently being used that has been distributed at cost. AstraZeneca took the decision to license the Oxford vaccine around the world at cost rather than making a profit on it and should be commended for that.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab) [V]: One year after the UK's first covid patient arrived at Newcastle's Royal Victoria Infirmary, I know the Secretary of State will want to join me in congratulating Newcastle's NHS staff, GPs, public health professionals, volunteers and all those leading the way in vaccinating so many, so quickly. Will he agree to reward such success by handing more resources and control over the failing test and trace programme to local public health teams, who are closer to communities and can better understand local transmission chains, which we need to do if we are to get the virus under control?

Matt Hancock: Yes, absolutely. Local authorities are critical to this, and we are working with directors of public health as part of the effort.

Mark Eastwood (Dewsbury) (Con) [V]: Yesterday, I had the pleasure of meeting the Prime Minister at the Al-Hikmah vaccination centre to highlight the importance of people from local communities accepting the offer of a vaccine. What message could my right hon. Friend give to the people of Dewsbury, Mirfield, Kirkburton and Denby Dale who may be thinking twice about having an inoculation when given the opportunity?

Matt Hancock: I would say to everybody that they should listen to the my hon. Friend, their local representative, and to all those who have looked at the impact of the vaccine. We can see that it saves lives and that it is safe to take. We can see that the rumours that have spread on the internet are just that—they are rumours, not facts. I would listen to local faith leaders too, from churches, mosques and synagogues right across the country, who are all uniting to say that we should take the jab when it is our turn. It is the right thing for you and it is the right thing for your community.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab) [V]: The Health Secretary will understand the concern about the discovery of the South African variant in the borough of Sefton, but can he tell us what variant he referred to in relation to a number of cases in Liverpool? He knows that I have raised concern a number of times about the number of people who cannot afford to self-isolate or stay at home. That is even more important now with the spread of new variants and mutations. Will he tell me now that he is going to push his Cabinet colleagues to plug the gaps in financial support, so that everybody can play their part and stay at home to stop the spread of the virus?

Matt Hancock: We have put in place the £500 support to ensure that everybody can afford to self-isolate. As for the South African variant that has been discovered in Southport, we are, with the local authority, undertaking very significant action to try to isolate it and any spread. It is vital that all members of the community play their part: stay at home and get a test when it is offered by the local authority. There is more information on the Sefton website. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Southport (Damien Moore), who was not able to get on the call list, with whom I have been corresponding on this matter. He, along with the hon. Gentleman, has been playing an important part.

The cases in Liverpool I mentioned were in fact raised in the local media and described by Liverpool City Council a couple of weeks ago. I included them for

completeness to describe all those cases where we have seen a mutation, along with the 11 cases in the Bristol area that I also described, which have been set out in a scientific study from the University of Leicester today. We have been working very closely with Liverpool City Council and Bristol City Council on those two clusters, along with the councils of all those where a variant of concern, such as the South African variant, has been found. I hope that that is a complete enough answer and I am very happy to talk to the hon. Gentleman if he has any further questions.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Yesterday I was speaking on the telephone to Mrs Bunny England, who was a WAAF in the second world war, and, at 92, is very, very young. She tells me that she is housebound and no one has contacted her about a vaccination. I assured her that I would inform the quite excellent and responsive South East London Clinical Commissioning Group about her case, and that I was sure she would be contacted very quickly. Can I ask my right hon. Friend, who is doing extremely well, whether we are going to be able to get to every single person in groups 1 to 4 who is housebound by 15 February?

Matt Hancock: Mrs Bunny England is certainly going to get her jab now. I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for raising her case. I will get straight on to the CCG, which, as he says, is excellent. Of course, we have roving teams right across the country going to people who are housebound. It is very important that we reach all with that offer, and we are on track to ensure that everybody can have the offer of a vaccination by 15 February. I appreciate that somebody in their 90s will have been waiting for that call for a couple of weeks now, but we are making good progress and I will make sure that Mrs England gets her jab.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab) [V]: Last week I visited a number of new pharmacy-led vaccination centres set up in my constituency. It was incredible to see the tireless hard work of staff and volunteers. These vaccination centres are struggling to navigate the confusion caused by the two online booking systems. They are seeing patients being sent to centres much further away, rather than staying local, and patients aged over 70 who cannot get an appointment as the national booking system is not updated in line with the Government guidance. Will the Secretary of State look into these issues with some urgency?

Matt Hancock: First, may I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman's leadership in his local area and community in demonstrating how important it is to get the jab, as so many colleagues across the House are doing? It is wonderful that we have total unanimity in this House on the importance of the vaccination programme, and the work that people are doing—on all sides of the House and from all backgrounds—to promote the vaccination effort really makes me very proud; it is humbling.

Of course I will look into the specific issue that the hon. Gentleman raises. I will ask the Minister for vaccine deployment, the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), to call him to talk specifically about it. There are two different routes through which people can get a jab: the mass vaccination centres or GPs. People are often invited to both, and that is okay.

They can take one or the other, whichever is most convenient. If they get an invitation to a vaccination centre that is a bit of a distance away and want to wait for a closer one, they can do so. That closer invitation from the local GPs will come. A lot of people appreciate the opportunity essentially to go as soon as possible, which is why we have two different routes. I understand the importance of making that clear to everybody and ensuring that they are as deconflicted as possible. I hope that we can make sure that this process goes as smoothly as possible, and that the hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary can make that work.

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con) [V]: Sussex today reached the twin milestones of vaccinating 85% of its over-80s and every care home bar the small number with recent outbreaks. Will the Secretary of State join me in thanking Siobhan Melia, Adam Doyle and their teams in NHS Sussex, and all the many GPs and the army of volunteers in Arundel and South Downs?

Matt Hancock: Absolutely; I am very happy to congratulate everyone in Arundel and South Downs and across Sussex, who have done a magnificent job so far. There is a lot more still to do, but they are doing a great job. I particularly pay tribute to those who have volunteered their time; they can often end up standing in the car park in the cold for an eight-hour shift. The spirit that is being shown in Sussex and right across the country is really uplifting, and we all need something that is uplifting in these difficult times.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: The Secretary of State is very well aware that when he does good things, I tell him so, and there is much to celebrate today. But before we get too euphoric, can I remind him that 406 people died yesterday of covid and that 70 people have died in Huddersfield hospitals since 1 January? The fight is still on, but the team working in my constituency and beyond is brilliant. They are all keeping to the rules, but will he please stop the Prime Minister breaking all the rules, going around the country and stirring up discontent?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Gentleman was doing so well: I agreed with all of what he was saying until the last bit. Of course the Prime Minister is going to go around the country and thank people for what they are doing. We just heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Mark Eastwood) about the very positive impact the Prime Minister had during his visit to Dewsbury. I know that people across Scotland were very enthusiastic to see the Prime Minister visiting Scotland to say thank you to those working in the labs, on the testing and on the vaccinations. Perhaps the Prime Minister will come to Huddersfield and the brilliant vaccination centre there. If he cannot make it, perhaps I should go there, with the hon. Gentleman, to say a great big thanks. Travelling around the country to thank people for their efforts is an important part of keeping the nation going in these difficult times.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con) [V]: There is more positive news because among the half a million vaccinations provided across the country last Saturday were 750 at Locke House in Rugby, where more than 11,000 have already been given and priority groups 1 to 4 will be

[Mark Pawsey]

completed ahead of schedule by this time next week. Will the Secretary of State thank the GPs and everyone involved in this achievement, particularly the 100 or so volunteers at the site, who have turned out for long shifts in all weathers, led by the inspirational centre manager, Gita Natarajan? Could he say a little more about the steps being taken to ensure that the second dose of the vaccine will be of the same variety as the first?

Matt Hancock: I have always loved Rugby, and the idea that Rugby is going to deliver on everyone in categories 1 to 4 having an offer of a jab a week early is music to my ears. I am delighted to hear about it. I can absolutely confirm that we have confidence in the supplies of vaccine to ensure that everybody can get a second jab of the vaccination they had the first time, unless there is a specific clinical reason not to; that would happen only in very rare circumstances. The plan is that you get the same jab second time around as you got the first.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP) [V]: According to the Global Institute, high-income countries representing 16% of the world's population currently have about 60% of the vaccines purchased so far. So can the Secretary of State tell us what plans the Government have to start sharing supplies with low-income and middle-income countries? Can he share with us the Government's plans on an international approach?

Matt Hancock: This is a very important question. Although I am incredibly proud of the UK vaccine roll-out and very pleased that we bought early so that we have access to the supplies of 407 million doses, we are also deeply aware of our international obligations, with the provision of the Oxford vaccine to the world, but also the financial support essentially through COVAX and GAVI, to make sure that people across the world have access to this vaccine. It is not "either/or"; it is "and". Although my first priority and responsibility as UK Health Secretary is to ensure that the UK has access to this vaccine, this disease has demonstrated that it does not respect international boundaries and it is important that everywhere gets access to the jab.

Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con) [V]: The variant of covid that was first identified from South African samples has been found within the PR9 postcode. That postcode covers the town of Banks, which is within South Ribble in Lancashire. There is understandable concern among residents and a celebratable desire to do the right thing. Can my right hon. Friend offer any reassurance to the residents so close to Southport, and set out what they can do with testing, for example, to do the right thing in this situation?

Matt Hancock: Absolutely. Sefton Council leads on this particular outbreak, but I understand that there are some residents in Lancashire who are in that postcode area. The website sets out where the door-to-door testing will cover and the activities that the council is leading on, working with us, making sure that we get testing as broad as possible.

If you are in the PR9 postcode area, or any of the other postcodes that I set out yesterday, it is very important to be especially vigilant. It is imperative to

stay at home unless it is absolutely essential that you leave home. I understand the concern—of course I do—but the reason that we have been so clear that these are the postcode areas is that we do need people to take action to limit the community spread in the vicinity of the cases that we have found.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab) [V]: The Health Secretary rightly said that our mission should be to stop the South African variant spreading. The community spread shows that border measures are failing to do that. He has set out no timetable for quarantine hotels today and, seven weeks after the variant was identified, it is still possible for people to travel home from South Africa and elsewhere, with no quarantine hotels, no quarantine taxis and no test on arrival, and go straight on to public transport in the UK. Why is that still allowed and how long is he going to allow it?

Matt Hancock: As the right hon. Lady knows, we have brought in very significant measures at the border to control the arrival of those from countries at risk, for instance, South Africa and other southern African nations, Brazil and nations around Brazil, and Portugal. The self-isolation requirements that she mentions are absolutely critical, but we are also of course looking at what further measures are necessary.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con) [V]: The roll-out of vaccines in north and north-east Lincolnshire is going extremely well and I am sure that my right hon. Friend will want to join me in congratulating all those involved on their magnificent efforts. To follow on from questions about the housebound, yesterday I was contacted by the family of an elderly gentleman who lives alone in a rural part of my constituency, who received an invitation for a vaccination at a centre considerably far from his home, and he wanted it locally. I appreciate that there is a follow-up, but the initial letter can cause confusion for people. Will my right hon. Friend do all he can to assure me that the follow-up letter inviting people for a local vaccination comes swiftly after that first letter?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I am happy to work with my hon. Friend. The best thing might be if I ask the Minister for Vaccine Deployment to call him straightaway to ensure that his constituent gets the vaccination as locally as possible.

I also take on board the broader point, because it is not just about that constituent, important though that is; it is also about making sure that everybody can have the vaccine as locally as reasonably possible. We also need a local voluntary effort, which is happening in so many parts of the country, to help elderly people to be able to get to a vaccination centre. If a constituent is housebound, the roving vaccinations teams need to be able to reach them. That takes longer than vaccinating through any other route, for obvious reasons, but it is a very important part of the scheme.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD) [V]: I welcome the commitment from the Secretary of State to lean in, I think he said, to the international effort to roll-out vaccines everywhere across the world. No one is safe until we are all safe, anywhere, not least because if we do not do this in tandem, it increases the chances of

variants coming here that would undermine our own impressive efforts. When does the Government plan to start parallel distribution of the vaccine, particularly to low-income countries, some of which have had no vaccines at all? Should it not be as soon as we have completed the vaccination of our clinically most vulnerable?

Matt Hancock: After we have completed the vaccination of the clinically extremely vulnerable, there are still many millions of people here who are at risk of dying from this dreadful disease. We will absolutely lean in to the international effort. Thanks to the fact that we chose not to join the EU scheme, we are of course far further ahead than we would have been otherwise, as the hon. Lady knows. We will play that vital role internationally, but she will also understand why it is so important that we fulfil our first duty to keep people in the UK safe.

Fay Jones (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con) [V]: It has been a privilege to be one of the volunteers at my local vaccination centre in Builth Wells and I commend Powys Teaching Health Board and all the vaccination staff for their efforts. Residents in Ystradgynlais, the largest town in my constituency, currently have to travel more than 50 miles to get their jabs. As a result, the local GP is working almost around the clock to ensure that people who cannot travel can get their vaccine. As well as thanking everyone involved in delivering the vaccine in Brecon and Radnorshire, will my right hon. Friend confirm that the roll-out is an agile system and that the Government will not allow the challenge of rural areas to impede our progress?

Matt Hancock: Yes. Across England, we have set the goal of having a vaccination centre within 10 miles of where anybody lives. It is harder in more rural parts, such as my hon. Friend's constituency, of course. We are absolutely willing to support the Welsh NHS in delivery locally. In fact, the British armed services are involved in support of the roll-out across Wales, as they are in England. I am happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss what more we can do to ensure that people can get the vaccination as easily and closely as possible in her sparse and very beautiful constituency.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab) [V]: A new research paper published today by Newcastle University demonstrates the link between poor mental health and welfare support, and this pandemic has particularly tested the mental health of so many of us. Will the Secretary of State urge the Chancellor of the Exchequer to keep the £20 universal credit top-up after March and to extend it to those on legacy benefits so that the mental health of those on benefits is not even more affected?

Matt Hancock: I will take those representations to my Cabinet colleagues, as I know that they are working hard to ensure that everybody gets the support they need.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con) [V]: The roll-out of the vaccine across my borough of Bexley has been very successful to date, and I congratulate all involved. Will my right hon. Friend note that NHS information and co-operation across our area of south-east London has been absolutely superb? Will he confirm, though, that the second doses of the vaccine will be delivered on time, including to the housebound?

Matt Hancock: Yes. The second doses are important. Although the time from the first dose to the second is 12 weeks, that does not make it any less important that we have the vaccines ready. We have a high degree of confidence that they will be there and we are already planning for the roll-out of the second doses; we know when each of those doses becomes due, because it is 12 weeks after the first dose. That planning is in hand and, frankly, compared with the time we have had for planning during most of the pandemic, 12 weeks is an absolute age.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab) [V]: The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation states that the implementation of the vaccine should also involve flexibility in vaccine deployment at a local level, with due attention to, among other things, mitigating health inequalities. Will the Health Secretary outline whether his Department believes that homeless people who have complex health conditions because of their accommodation status should be prioritised for vaccination?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I am working with the Housing, Communities and Local Government Secretary on a specific programme for the roll-out of the vaccine to people who are homeless.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con) [V]: I very much associate myself with my right hon. Friend's remarks about the noble Lord Fowler, who of course was in charge of the combined Department of Health and Social Security. While I applaud the Government's very wise decision not to sign up to the EU vaccination programme, when I visit Highlands vaccination centre tomorrow, will I be able to reassure my constituents that they will still receive their second doses of vaccine on time now that we have left the European Union?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I am glad to say that we are working with our EU counterparts to ensure the fair distribution and manufacture of vaccines according to signed contracts, which is the right and proper way that it should be. Thankfully we signed those contracts early and we made sure that we got solid contracts to deliver the necessary doses to the UK. I look forward to those being delivered on, and I have assurances from all quarters that that is what will now happen.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab) [V]: We know that there is a reduced antibody response against the new covid variants for vaccinated blood, but what is the level of change in vaccine efficacy, and what action is under way to update and approve new vaccines to address this? I am particularly thinking of the E484K mutation found in both the Brazilian and South African variants.

Matt Hancock: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to ask this critical question. We are doing a huge amount with the scientists and the pharmaceutical industry to develop modified vaccines should they be necessary. We are also monitoring the results of work to understand the efficacy of the existing vaccines against the variants of concern. We do not have a point estimate for the difference in the efficacy of the vaccine. The efficacy needs to be measured both in terms of someone's likelihood of catching the disease and in terms of their

[*Matt Hancock*]

likelihood of being hospitalised or dying from the disease. There is a significant amount of work under way to understand all those things, both in labs and in the field. For instance, AstraZeneca has a trial in South Africa that it is revisiting to understand the progress of those who were vaccinated as part of the trial. We will publish as much information as we get as soon as we credibly can. I wish I could give a number in answer to the hon. Lady's very astute question, but unfortunately it is not scientifically credibly available yet.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con) [V]: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his decisions of last year to guarantee the surplus supplies of vaccine, and I thank all the NHS staff and volunteers in Wimbledon who are delivering it. Clearly, getting the vaccine rolled out as fast as possible is key. Therefore, can he confirm that he will make sure that best practice advice is being given to every vaccine centre to ensure that there are no supplies unused at the end of the day and that there is a reserve list for appointments?

Matt Hancock: The vaccine programme has been enormous hard work by a huge number of people. It is very heartening to see it progress as it is, including in Wimbledon, where it is going well, and I am very grateful for my hon. Friend's support in making that happen. The need to use every last drop of this precious vaccine is paramount. The standard operating protocol clearly states that all vaccine doses that are available should be used. If we can get 11 doses out of the 10-dose AstraZeneca vial, then we should do so. It is now standard practice to get six doses out of the previously five-dose Pfizer vial. There should also be a reserve list of people in categories 1 to 4 who can be called up at the end of the day if there is any spare. But the most important thing is that if the vaccine is going off—if it is coming to the end of its time out of the freezer, for the Pfizer jab—then it should be used in all circumstances. We need to use every last drop.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. We will now have a three-minute suspension for cleaning.

2.49 pm

Sitting suspended.

Myanmar

2.52 pm

The Minister for Asia (Nigel Adams): I would like to update the House on the situation in Myanmar. On Sunday evening, Myanmar's armed forces, the Tatmadaw, seized control of the country, declaring a state of emergency in the early hours of Monday morning. The country is now under the effective control of the commander-in-chief and the military vice-president, Myint Swe. At around 0200 hours local time on 1 February, the Tatmadaw began detaining politicians and civil society leaders across the country, including the democratically elected Aung San Suu Kyi and President U Win Myint. The Tatmadaw has said that this state of emergency will continue for a year.

The army has also taken control of the airports. Only military broadcasters are still on air, and phone lines and the internet remain at risk of being disconnected again. The military's actions follow on from its accusations of fraud during November's election. Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy won by a landslide and the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development party's share was drastically reduced. While there were significant concerns about the disenfranchisement of minority groups such as the Rohingya, there are no suggestions of widespread irregularities. International observers, such as the Carter Centre and the Asian Network for Free Elections, found no evidence of significant irregularities in the elections. As such, the United Kingdom considers the election result to credibly reflect the will of the people and that Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy party is the rightful winner of the election.

The commander-in-chief has indicated an intention to hold new elections to replace the results of those in November 2020. Any dispute regarding the election results should be resolved through peaceful and lawful mechanisms. The Myanmar Supreme Court is hearing a case on alleged irregularities but has not yet decided whether it has jurisdiction. The reports today of the arrest of the chair of the Union Election Commission are deeply concerning.

The events of Sunday night have filled us all with a profound sense of revulsion and sadness. Our thoughts are with the people of Myanmar, who have once again been robbed of their inherent democratic rights. The elections in 2020, though by no means perfect, were an important step on Myanmar's path to democracy. We and others welcomed them as a strong endorsement of Myanmar's desire for a democratic future. Myanmar's transition has been troubled, with a constitution rigged in favour of the military, a campaign of atrocities and systematic discrimination against the Rohingya and other minorities, and a faltering peace process.

This coup threatens to set Myanmar's progress back by years—potentially decades. As such, we are clear in our condemnation of this coup, the state of emergency imposed in Myanmar and the unlawful detention of democratically elected politicians and civil society by the military. The Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary both issued statements to this effect on Monday morning. It is essential that Aung San Suu Kyi and all those unlawfully detained are released. We must receive assurances that their safety, wellbeing and rights are being respected. The state of emergency must be repealed, arbitrary detentions reversed, the outcome of the democratic

elections respected and the National Assembly peacefully reconvened. We are aware that there is a risk that demonstrations could provoke a violent response, taking Myanmar back to the dark days of the 1988 uprising or the 2007 saffron revolution, in which scores of civilians were killed.

As for the UK response, we are pursuing all levers to ensure a peaceful return to democracy. First, we have made representations at the highest level within Myanmar to encourage all sides to resolve disputes in a peaceful and legal manner. The Foreign Secretary had a call scheduled for later this week with Aung San Suu Kyi prior to her detention. We are clear in our demands that this call goes ahead and we hope that it will serve as an opportunity to confirm her safety. I formally summoned Myanmar's ambassador to the UK to the Foreign Office yesterday. In the meeting, I condemned the military coup and the arbitrary detention of civilians, including Aung San Suu Kyi, and made it clear that the democratic wishes of the people of Myanmar must be respected, and the elected National Assembly peacefully reconvened. We are doing all we can, working with those in Myanmar, to support a peaceful resolution to this crisis.

Secondly, the international community has a role to play. We are engaging with partners globally and in the region to help to align objectives and find a resolution to the crisis. We will work through multilateral fora to ensure a strong and co-ordinated international response. As president, the Foreign Secretary is co-ordinating G7 partners on its response, aiming to build on its quick statement last week on Navalny. The UK has urgently convened the UN Security Council, which will meet later today. As a champion of the rules-based international order and democratic government, we are driving the international response, including in our role as president of both the G7 and the UN Security Council, urging the military to immediately hand back power to the Government that were legitimately elected in November 2020. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations also has an important role to play, as do the principles of the ASEAN charter, including the rule of law, good governance, and the principles of democracy and constitutional government. We continue to engage with ASEAN partners to support a regional response, and I held a meeting with the Thai vice-Foreign Minister this morning.

Thirdly, it is the military's actions that instigated this coup. The UK already has a number of measures in place in response to the military's past and ongoing atrocities. On 19 September 2017, the UK announced the suspension of all defence engagement and training with the Myanmar military by the Ministry of Defence until there is a satisfactory resolution to the situation in Rakhine. The MOD no longer has a defence section in Yangon. The United Kingdom has already imposed sanctions on 16 individuals responsible for human rights violations in Myanmar. We sanctioned all six individuals named by the UN fact-finding mission report, including the commander-in-chief and his deputy, who are the architects of the current political situation and who also have the power to de-escalate the crisis and restore democracy. We will assess how best to engage with the military, if at all. We have also enhanced private sector due diligence to prevent UK funds from going to military-owned companies.

The UK does not provide direct financial aid to the Myanmar Government, but we provide some targeted support, working through other international organisations

and multilateral bodies. In the light of the coup, the Foreign Secretary has today announced a review of all such indirect support involving the Myanmar Government, with a view to suspending it unless there are exceptional humanitarian reasons. It is important that our response holds the military accountable.

We will continue to support the people of Myanmar. We will continue leading the international response to this crisis and calling on the military leaders in Myanmar to relent, revoke the state of emergency, release members of the civilian Government and civil society, including State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and President Win Myint, reconvene the elected National Assembly, respect the results of the November 2020 general election, and accept the expressed wishes of the people of Myanmar. I commend the statement to the House.

3.3 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement.

The Labour party will always speak up for universal rights and freedoms, the rule of law and democracy across the world, including in Myanmar. We know that democracy is in retreat around the world, and for the first time since 2001, democratic Governments are outnumbered by authoritarian regimes. What took place in Myanmar yesterday and over the weekend serves to remind us of the daunting scale and nature of the challenge we face. This military coup is a flagrant breach of the constitution of Myanmar, and must be condemned in the strongest terms. The army's claims of voter fraud are utterly spurious. This is a naked power grab.

While Aung San Suu Kyi's failure to stand up for the human rights of the Rohingya people has been deeply troubling, the fact is that her party secured a landslide victory in the November elections, and Myanmar's young democracy must be respected and protected. Let us not forget the human cost of this coup: many brave elected representatives and activists were rounded up in the dead of night, their families terrified by the men in uniform on the doorstep. Now they languish in prison cells.

How has it come to this? Well, for decades, the power-hungry Myanmar military has oppressed and persecuted the Burmese people, committing countless atrocities—most notably against the Rohingya, for which it currently stands accused of genocide in the International Court of Justice. Experts on Myanmar are clear that the tacit support of China, combined with the rest of the world turning a blind eye, has given the military the confidence to enact this coup, based on the assumption that the international backlash will be negligible and lethargic. The UK and the wider international community must act swiftly and effectively to prove the military wrong on this. The UK Government must move from warm words of condemnation to tangible action. As the penholder on Myanmar at the Security Council, the UK has a particular and unique responsibility to lead the international response. We welcome the Security Council session the Government have convened today, but we believe there are further steps that must be taken.

First, the Government must lead by example by imposing sanctions on the Myanmar military and all its business interests. When I urged the Minister to take this action last year, he argued against such measures on the ground that it would have a negative impact on foreign investment into the Myanmar economy. Well,

[Stephen Kinnock]

there is nothing like a military coup to damage foreign investment, so surely the Minister must now accept that his argument no longer stands up to scrutiny and that the Government must immediately impose sanctions that directly target the military and its financial backers. We on the Opposition Benches strongly support the Magnitsky sanctions against individuals in Myanmar, but let us be clear that they are designed predominantly for countries where senior officials have economic interests in the UK, such as Russia and China, and this is not the case for Myanmar.

Secondly, the UK Government should seek to extend the arms embargo against Myanmar so that it is as close as possible to global in its scale and scope. Clearly, authoritarian regimes such as Russia and China will be unlikely to participate, but we must seek to build the broadest possible coalition of countries committed to not selling weapons to Myanmar.

Thirdly, now must surely be the time for the Minister to commit the UK to joining the Netherlands and Canada in formally supporting the Gambia in its case of genocide brought against Myanmar at the ICJ. Will he also call for Myanmar's first report to the ICJ, published last June, to be made public in order to shine a light on the atrocities committed by the military? I would also like the Minister to set out what conversations he has had with the Bangladeshi Government to ensure that humanitarian aid contributed by the UK is sufficiently reaching the Rohingya who have fled to Cox's Bazar.

Finally, what consular support are the UK Government offering to UK citizens who are in Myanmar and caught in the middle of this appalling military coup?

I respect the Minister, and I know that his heart is in the right place on this issue, but I have to say to him that this statement falls far short of what we need and what we expect—nothing on sanctions, nothing on the ICJ. The people of Myanmar need a stronger response, and they need it now.

Nigel Adams: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the tone of his response, and also for welcoming the international engagement, in particular at the UN Security Council. As he rightly remarks, as penholder, we have brought forward by a day a meeting on Myanmar at the Council as a matter of urgency, and that meeting will take place in New York this afternoon.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned sanctions on the military. I politely point out to him that we have already imposed sanctions on 16 individuals responsible for human rights violations in Myanmar, including six individuals named by the UN fact-finding mission report. However, of course we will work closely with our international partners to consider next steps in that regard and we will constantly consider all the tools at our disposal.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether we would support an international arms embargo. We are a long-standing supporter of an arms embargo in Myanmar. We worked with EU partners to secure and tighten a strong EU arms embargo following the 2017 Rohingya crisis. Since we left the EU, we have transitioned this into domestic law. Our autonomous sanctions regulations prohibit the provision of military-related services, including the provision of technical assistance, to or for the benefit of the Tatmadaw.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the case brought by the Gambia. We have been very clear in our support for the ICJ process, which is putting pressure on Myanmar, and particularly the military, to do more to protect the Rohingya. We have pressed the civilian Government to engage constructively and transparently, and we urge the military to comply with the provisional measures ruling.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned Bangladesh. We are working very closely with the Bangladesh authorities and we are speaking with the Bangladesh Government. We are the second largest donor to support the Rohingya who are currently in Bangladesh.

We are following the advice very carefully of our post in Yangon on the situation involving UK nationals. We will continue to update British nationals in that regard. They are advised to stay at home, to make only essential journeys and to continue to check travel advice and embassy social media pages. I have spoken with our ambassador on a couple of occasions over the last 24 hours, and we continue to closely monitor the situation.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I welcome my hon. Friend's statement and agree with much of what the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) said. When looking at sanctions, we know that Myanmar Economic Holdings Ltd is alleged to be paying out dividends of around \$18 billion to \$20 billion a year to the army. Is it not particularly galling that, despite this army claiming to serve the people and to put the public interest first by overthrowing a democratically elected leader, Myanmar is the single worst country in the world for vaccinating its citizens? Does that not demonstrate that, rather than being servants of the people, the Myanmar armed forces are its pillagers, its occupiers and its thieves?

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend, the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, makes a very good point. The UK military, in contrast, has done a fantastic job of supporting the roll-out of vaccinations here. As he knows, we unreservedly condemn the military coup in Myanmar and the detention of members of the Government. The military's action is not conducive to supporting the most vulnerable people, so we call for the peaceful reconvening of the National Assembly. The results of the elections in November 2020 must be adhered to, as must the express wishes of the people of Myanmar—they need a democratically elected Government who can help see them through this pandemic.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP) [V]: I hope I have demonstrated in the House that I do not believe in fabricating difference. I agree with all the content of the Minister's statement, and I commend him on it, as far as it goes. I would like to press him on further action that it would be useful to take.

This is yet another reminder of the importance of all of us—Government, state and individuals—being vocal advocates at home and abroad for the rule of law. I invite the Minister to mention to his ministerial colleagues just how damaging it was for the UK to mull the idea of breaking recently agreed international provisions in a "limited and specific" way. That really has weakened all our credibility in this discussion.

I support the international efforts that the Minister is taking forward, particularly within the G7—a position that the UK can use to the betterment of this. There is a strong case for further sanctions against the Burmese military as an organisation. There have been welcome sanctions on individuals, and there could be more of those, but the military is a huge commercial enterprise that is vulnerable to sanctions. I would also like reassurance on something that the Minister did not mention, which was co-operation with the EU. I think the EU's position on this will be important, and co-ordinating on that will be very much to the benefit. It is early days yet, but what assessment has been made by our mission within country of the already dreadful situation of the Rohingya? Is there a risk of flight of Rohingya into Cox's Bazar and into Bangladesh? Can the Minister give a reassurance that if more aid is necessary, we stand ready to provide it to the Bangladeshi Government, because this will take a concerted international effort? If he continues along those tracks, he will have our support.

Nigel Adams: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his co-operative tone on matters such as this. I believe we are all on the same page in this regard, and his comments about us working with international partners are absolutely right. Given our presidency of the G7 and the UN Security Council, we are using these opportunities to drive forward the international response, and that will include dealing and liaising with our friends in the EU. We all need to stand together to demonstrate that we will not stand for a subversion of democracy. We are talking with a broad range of international partners, including the neighbours of Myanmar, and especially the ASEAN countries. The hon. Gentleman mentioned aid. This year, the UK is spending £88 million in-country in Myanmar on supporting the people of Myanmar. In addition, since 2017 we have spent almost a third of a billion pounds supporting humanitarian aid and supporting the Rohingya who are displaced and have found themselves in Bangladesh.

Imran Ahmad Khan (Wakefield) (Con) [V]: Like all Members of this House, I found myself deeply disappointed when Aung San Suu Kyi chose to take no action against the genocide of Rohingya, but that grave failure should not temper our condemnation of the quasi-constitutional military coup, which undermines the futures, freedoms and democratic rights of the Burmese people. Will my hon. Friend the Minister further outline what his Department is doing to promote the fundamental and universal rights of democracy, freedom and liberty in Burma in light of the recent events?

Nigel Adams: I know how passionate my hon. Friend feels about values and democracy, and I assure him that the United Kingdom places the highest premium on respect for democracy and the rules-based international system. We have been talking to regional and international partners about that, and we call on Myanmar to respect the principles of the ASEAN charter, including the rule of law, good governance, as I mentioned, and the principles of democracy and constitutional government.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab) [V]: For over three years, I have repeatedly called for the Government to enact sanctions against the Burmese military for its brutality in the Rohingya genocide, but on each occasion those calls were rejected by the Foreign, Commonwealth

and Development Office, which essentially told me that imposing sanctions would endanger the fledgling democracy in the country. Does the Minister now agree that this military coup shows that those were unfounded claims and, frankly, poor excuses for refusing to act in the face of the genocide against the Rohingya? Instead, the Government did more harm than good by emboldening the Burmese military.

Nigel Adams: I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman has kept up to speed, but in fact the United Kingdom has already imposed sanctions on military individuals, including the commander-in-chief and his deputy. We are absolutely clear. If the hon. Gentleman's campaigning over the past three years on this issue has led to that, I congratulate him, but we have already delivered sanctions for human rights violations in Myanmar. Let us be absolutely clear, the commander-in-chief and his deputy are the architects of this current crisis.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): The actions of the Myanmar military are an assault on democracy and the democratically legitimate Government. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is vital that they immediately confirm the safety of Aung San Suu Kyi?

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the safety of Aung San Suu Kyi. The Prime Minister had a phone call with Aung San Suu Kyi before Christmas and the Foreign Secretary was due to have a phone call with her this week. It is essential that she and all those who have been arbitrarily detained are released. We must receive assurances that their safety, wellbeing and rights are respected—I reiterated that to the Myanmar ambassador when I summoned him to Foreign Office yesterday. As I said, there should have been a call later this week, and we hope that one will take place to serve as an assurance of Aung San Suu Kyi's safety and wellbeing, because it is vital that we are able to confirm that she is safe.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD) [V]: The Minister will know that the major player in this crisis is China, the economy of which Myanmar is far more dependent on than others. The relationship between the military and the Chinese Government has in the past been ambiguous, given how destabilising China's actions are to the region. Notwithstanding whatever grievances we may have in respect of the Uyghurs and Hong Kong, this is a moment in which we should be working together, including with China, to solve this crisis. Can the Minister make an assessment of China's likely response at this time? Have our Government had conversations with the Chinese Government about such a co-ordinated international response?

Nigel Adams: Very much so. The Foreign Secretary is leading on this issue with the G7 and we hope to have some further news in that regard in the next day or so. We are absolutely on the front foot internationally in that regard. I know that the hon. Lady is passionate about this particular country. Let me be absolutely clear about what we are calling for: the military leaders must revoke the state of emergency and release the members of the Government and of civil society.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con) [V]: The events in Myanmar have shown that democracy is fragile. The reality is that the actions of the democracy-denying

[*Alec Shelbrooke*]

narcissist Trump in the past three months have undermined such values. Will my hon. Friend the Minister not only work with the G7, as he said, but impress upon the new US Administration how important it is for established western democracies to show strength and to stress how important it is that democracy is honoured? Will he ensure that the G7, as a group, moves together to ensure that this situation comes to an end?

Nigel Adams: I thank my right hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for his question. We are absolutely working through the G7 and engaging the UN Human Rights Council. As I said, we are urgently convening the UN Security Council. We have, of course, engaged with our American friends at both official level and at Foreign Secretary level. Over the next day, we will be making sure that Myanmar is high up the agenda. We are using such opportunities to drive forward the international response and, as I said, we will not stand a subversion of democracy.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab) [V]: I have been privileged to visit Myanmar with the Westminster Foundation for Democracy and as an observer at the NLD's first party conference, which was a time of great optimism that was sadly not entirely fulfilled. It is now clear that we could have handled things differently in that interim period by applying more pressure for constitutional reform and reducing the power of the military. Will the Minister say a bit more about what we hope to achieve by sanctions now, other than the restoration of democracy and Aung San Suu Kyi's release from detention? What are our slightly longer-term goals in terms of trying to reduce the power of the military and putting Myanmar on a more democratic footing?

Nigel Adams: I think the reasons behind the Magnitsky-style sanctions announced a few months ago were pretty clear. We are absolutely clear that there were human rights violations in Myanmar and, I repeat, we sanctioned all six of the individuals named by the UN fact-finding mission report. We will obviously work closely with our international partners to consider next steps in this regard, but the UK Government's priorities at this immediate time are to ensure that the military leaders revoke the state of emergency, release those held, including Aung San Suu Kyi, and reconvene the elected National Assembly.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): I welcome the Minister's statement. The events in Myanmar are a reminder that we need a strong international community to be able to respond to such events. With that in mind, I echo other Members' calls for further sanctions. May I also draw his attention to the humanitarian violations going on and the need to create a preventing-sexual-violence-in-conflict body in this country with international co-operation to ensure that we can support survivors of sexual violence, genocide and human rights violations, document such cases and lead international criminal cases against the perpetrators?

Nigel Adams: I know how passionately my hon. Friend feels about these issues, particularly with regard to his work with the former Foreign Secretary prior to being

elected to this House. I repeat that it is completely unacceptable for a democratically elected Government to be overthrown by the military in this way. We are, of course, working with international partners on all the issues he refers to, and we will continue to do so. We are monitoring the situation, and we have been very concerned about the humanitarian situation over the last 72 hours. As he will appreciate, following a military coup it is difficult to get to the places we need to be, but he is right to raise the issues and we will continue to monitor the situation extremely closely.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): This appalling military coup and overthrow of a democratically elected Government is undoubtedly a major setback for the progress and development of Myanmar. However, the likes of me are particularly concerned about the desperate plight of the Rohingya Muslims, who have faced a genocide. Approximately a million had to flee their own country and are now refugees in Bangladesh and other nations. What is the Minister doing to spearhead an international effort to ensure that there is no further crackdown by the authoritarian military regime on the hundreds of thousands of Rohingya still in Myanmar, many of whom are interned in camps and unable to move freely, with extremely limited access to basic health and education services?

Nigel Adams: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point, which is well made. As he will appreciate, the situation in the country is evolving rapidly. We are monitoring the situation as closely as we can, but we are also working closely with our partners. I talked about us convening the meeting this afternoon in New York so that we can have a joint response with the UN Security Council.

I assure him that we will ensure that we continue to provide life-saving humanitarian assistance, including for the Rohingya. We are alert to the possibility of all sorts of horrific violence, such as identity-based violence, being committed—there are reports of that. We are one of the largest donors to Rakhine state, which is one of the poorest states in Myanmar. Our assistance helps with education, nutrition, livelihoods and health, and we are supporting all communities.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con) [V]: I thank my hon. Friend for his statement. Will he update the House on what steps the Government are taking to mobilise international diplomacy against the Myanmar military?

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend is absolutely spot on to raise this. We are working through multilateral forums to ensure that there is a strong and co-ordinated international response. As I have said previously, we have urgently convened the UN Security Council for today. We are also leading the way through the G7 and engaging the UN Human Rights Council. Given our presidency of the G7 and the UNSC, we are using these as an opportunity to drive forward the international response. We must take leadership and demonstrate that we will not stand again for subversion of democracy.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP) [V]: May I associate myself with the remarks of the Minister and the two Opposition Front-Bench spokespersons? The Minister has reminded us that the commander-in-chief and his

deputy are responsible for the current emergency situation in Myanmar. They and their associates are also responsible for the wholesale and systematic campaign of rape, torture and murder of the Rohingya Muslims, entirely for racist reasons. Can he give us an assurance that, in among the other discussions that are now required within the international community, high up on the agenda will be a restated determination that everyone who was responsible for those atrocities in Myanmar will one day be brought to justice and held to account for their crimes?

Nigel Adams: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise this. We must ensure that there is accountability for those who have committed atrocities. The United Kingdom is clear that the Myanmar military undertook a campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya in 2017, and we are pushing for those guilty of atrocities to be held to account. In our joint statement to the UN Security Council on 11 September, we called for Myanmar to make progress on this accountability, and in the current absence of a credible domestic process, all options must be on the table, including referral to the International Criminal Court.

Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con) [V]: I thank my hon. Friend for his statement today on the concerning situation in Myanmar. Does he agree that the UK must be at the forefront of condemning these actions at the United Nations?

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Yes, we are engaging with a range of partners to encourage dialogue, peaceful resolution of the crisis and, importantly, the restoration of democracy. The Foreign Secretary has been speaking to his counterparts from other states and has a call scheduled with the US Secretary of State for later this week. He will also be speaking to the Japanese Foreign and Defence Ministers this week, and the Prime Minister is trying to arrange a call with his Japanese counterpart. We will work through multilateral forums to ensure a strong and co-ordinated international response.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind) [V]: Obviously, we must all absolutely condemn the coup in Myanmar. It is appalling what has happened, but sadly, the overpowering, brutal presence of the military has been a feature of the lives of people in Myanmar since the 1960s. Even during the recent slightly more democratic period in Myanmar's history, the military have occupied a special place in which they have been essentially untrammelled by any democratic accountability whatsoever, and the Rohingya people have suffered and will continue to suffer as a result of that. Hopefully, one day, we will look forward to a more democratic Myanmar. Does the Minister agree that when that happy day eventually comes, there has to be a constitution that does not give unaccountable power to the military but instead brings them under the control of a parliamentary democracy?

I am pleased that the Minister mentioned the United Nations Human Rights Council in his statement and one of his responses. Would it be possible for him to urge the UN Human Rights Council to put together very rapidly a delegation to be sent both to Myanmar and to Cox's Bazar to examine the human rights abuses that have happened, take the necessary evidence and condemn those that should be condemned—sadly including

Aung San Suu Kyi, who stood up in support of the military when her country was quite rightly condemned for the treatment of the Rohingya people?

Nigel Adams: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. We will of course continue to work through all multilateral forums, including at today's meeting of the UN Security Council, which we brought forward, and by pulling together our G7 partners, in order to have the appropriate response. I am sure the right hon. Gentleman would agree with me that what we want to see is the Myanmar military revoke this state of emergency. The civilian Government, Aung San Suu Kyi and civil society people who have been seized must be released. We want to see the reconvening of the National Assembly, as I am sure he does. It is absolutely key that Myanmar respects the result of the November election and, more importantly, accepts the expressed wish of the people of Myanmar.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): I welcome the Minister's statement. In a previous job, I was in Myanmar for the BBC. It is so depressing watching this new tragedy unfold. The UN Security Council is holding an emergency meeting today, which is of course incredibly welcome. Does the Minister share my concern that China's stranglehold on UN institutions and its alleged closeness to the Myanmar military mean that it might stifle the meeting today and going forward? Can he offer any succour for people like me who have those concerns?

Nigel Adams: I thank my hon. Friend for her remarks. Of course, we must work closely with our international partners. That is why we have brought forward today's meeting at the UN Security Council. Obviously, we cannot second-guess the outcome of the meeting this afternoon. I share many of my hon. Friend's concerns about the ability of countries to veto action in that multilateral body, but be in no doubt that the United Kingdom is on the front foot and is leading the international response on this crisis.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab) [V]: The Burmese military is as financially corrupt as it is brutal and anti-democratic. The Burmese military have managed to squirrel away stolen assets from the Burmese people, in the UK, in British overseas territories and in other democratic countries in the world. Can we not do more to make sure that they can be returned to the Burmese people?

While China still plays a role in refusing to allow those who are accused of genocides to come to a proper international court, how can the Minister be sure that those that perpetrate genocide are not just going to get away with it? If we cannot get such determinations in an international court, would it not make sense that they are made in a court of law in the UK?

Nigel Adams: I understand the point that the hon. Gentleman is trying to make. On the reference to genocide, we have been very clear that we support the current case in the ICJ process, putting pressure on Myanmar. I think the case will develop significantly in the coming months; we are monitoring that case very closely.

I do not have a crystal ball with regards to the points the hon. Gentleman raised about China, but we are going to very closely consider the legal arguments and,

[Nigel Adams]

for example, establish whether a UK intervention would add value in the current case that has been brought to the ICJ.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con) [V]: This is a huge setback for the people of Myanmar and for the development of open societies in the ASEAN region as a whole. The civil disobedience movement started by Government hospital doctors suggests an awful potential for protests and violence. While the Minister is quite right to highlight UK initiatives for an emergency session of the UN Security Council and with ASEAN, which has called for a return to normality, can I ask what contacts my hon. Friend and his Department have had with China to discuss the best way to return stability as soon as possible?

Nigel Adams: I thank my hon. Friend, who I know is extremely passionate, for all the work that he does on behalf of Her Majesty's Government in that region. ASEAN does have an important role to play. I had meetings with the Thai Vice Minister this morning. Yesterday, I spoke with the Laos ambassador, and I have further calls with all ASEAN nations over the next 48 hours. It is important that there is adherence to the principles of the ASEAN charter, which includes good governance and the rule of law. We will, of course, be speaking with China in this regard, as it is a significant player in the region. We are completely clear that the principles of democracy and constitutional government should be returned for the people of Myanmar.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab) [V]: This coup is the latest in a horrifying series of actions by the Myanmar military against the people of that country. We must do all we can to secure the immediate release of the democratically elected leader and all those who have been detained unlawfully. The military, led by General Min Aung Hlaing, have been acting for years with impunity, including in the atrocities committed against the Rohingya and other minorities.

The interventions of our Government, as well as those of the international community, have been insufficient. The UN Security Council meeting today is critically important, and I welcome that. Can the Minister tell the House whether our Government will be pushing for further tougher, targeted sanctions against the Burmese military and formally supporting the genocide prevention case at the International Court of Justice, led by the Gambia, to protect the remaining Rohingya people in that country? It is not good enough for the Minister to keep saying, "We are reviewing it," or, "We are supporting it, but we are not prepared to formally support it yet." It is time that we took action. If this coup is not enough to force our Government to act, then I do not know what else will force them to act to get behind this case. I hope the Minister can be more vociferous in answering those questions today.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Before the Minister responds, may I just ask those who are remaining to please ask more precise and shorter questions?

Nigel Adams: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I know how passionate she is about Myanmar and the plight of the Rohingya. We have had meetings on this matter directly. We are using our penholder role to ensure that Myanmar stays on the UN Security Council agenda. We convened the Security Council three times last year to discuss the case brought by Gambia, covid and the situation in Rakhine and the Chin states. We have been very clear that Myanmar has to make progress on accountability. The case will develop significantly in the coming months and, as I said in a previous answer, we will be carefully monitoring developments to consider the legal arguments to establish whether a UK intervention would add value, but I am sure the whole House will want to see the outcome of the UN Security Council meeting in New York this afternoon.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con) [V]: I very much welcome the Foreign Secretary reviewing UK international development assistance to Myanmar, particularly given the coup that has taken place in the past few days. However, for many years, UK taxpayers' money has essentially been wasted in that country, as we have seen human rights abuses against the Rohingya and the Chin people, and indeed, in the last Parliament, the International Development Committee being blocked from visiting that country by the Government. Can I ask that that review be extremely robust?

Nigel Adams: Absolutely. My hon. Friend is right. I would, though, take him to task a tiny bit. I am not entirely sure that our third of a billion pounds that we are spending to support the Rohingya could be deemed as wasted; this is vital humanitarian assistance. As I said, we are spending £88 million this year in Myanmar. He is absolutely right to condemn the coup in Myanmar. We need to see the peaceful reconvening of the National Assembly. We want the results of the election respected and, importantly, we need to see the expressed wishes of the people of Myanmar respected, which I know my hon. Friend is very passionate about.

Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab) [V]: As the Minister knows, over 1 million Rohingya refugees have fled Myanmar following an escalation of violence over the past few years. Many residents in Ilford South have written to me concerned that the recent coup is yet another in a long line of worrying developments for Rohingya people. Will the Minister explain what measures the Government have taken to protect Rohingya people, who may now face even greater levels of persecution and oppression?

Nigel Adams: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the plight of the Rohingya. We are working very closely with our partners to ensure that lifesaving humanitarian assistance is delivered for the Rohingya. We are alert to the possibility of further violence being committed. As I mentioned to my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith), we are one of the largest donors in Rakhine state, which is one of the poorest states in Myanmar. We will continue to provide humanitarian and development assistance to the most vulnerable areas.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con) [V]: I welcome the fact that we have called a meeting of the United Nations Security Council today. Will my hon. Friend elaborate on our approach to that meeting, given the fact that permanent members such as China and Russia have veto powers?

Nigel Adams: Our presidency of the UN Security Council, as my hon. Friend knows, began on Monday. Initially, the meeting was scheduled for Thursday. We brought it forward to ensure that this is viewed as a matter of urgency by the UN. Our representatives will be there this afternoon, as will those of other members. I have no reason not to believe that all our international partners are concerned about the situation in Myanmar. There will no doubt be a read-out following that meeting.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his clear commitment to freedom and democracy. As the House is all too aware, this is not the first time in recent years that Burmese military leaders have committed unconscionable crimes. Their brutal assault against the Rohingya community, which has displaced hundreds of thousands and murdered thousands, was described by the UN as a

“textbook example of ethnic cleansing”.

Does the Minister agree that the international community’s failure to take substantial action against the Burmese military following that assault has emboldened its leaders to act against democracy in Burma?

Nigel Adams: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point. This is a cause that rightly he champions every time he comes to this House. I gently point out that we have taken action against the Myanmar military, specifically the six individuals who were named in the UN fact-finding report. Sixteen in total were on the receiving end of our sanctions regime.

Dr Jamie Wallis (Bridgend) (Con) [V]: I thank the Minister for his statement. Does he agree that the sanctions already in place on the Myanmar military show that the UK has long taken action against human rights abuses there?

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend is right. I think it shows clear leadership. As I said to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), the six named individuals in the UN fact-finding report were in receipt of our sanctions, and 16 individuals in total. We will closely monitor the situation, working with our international partners. We do not rule anything out.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): What effect will the Government’s decision to cut their aid budget from 0.7% to 0.5% of gross national product have on their ability to sustain the level of humanitarian and development funding that the Minister has spoken of in Myanmar and for Rohingya refugees?

Nigel Adams: We will continue to provide humanitarian assistance to the most vulnerable; we are committed to doing so. We want to support the Myanmar people in their aspirations for democracy and peace, but we will not provide support for the Myanmar military Government. We will be reviewing all UK aid spending in Myanmar. We do not provide any direct financial support to the Government as it is. In response, the Foreign Secretary has today commissioned an urgent review of all our aid spending to ensure that we are not indirectly supporting the military Government. This review will be based first on maintaining support for the poorest and most vulnerable, and not giving undeserved legitimacy to the military regime, and it will help to protect the foundations for a more inclusive and accountable Myanmar.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Minister for his statement and for responding to 25 questions for just a couple of minutes short of an hour.

Point of Order

3.51 pm

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab) [V]: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I wish to inform the House that in my speech yesterday during the Opposition day debate on protecting tenants and leaseholders from unsafe cladding, I made reference to the Ballymore Group in relation to remediation costs. I said with regard to the example of New Providence Wharf:

“The recent update I have received about New Providence Wharf is that the remediation costs are set to be between £12.5 million and £25 million. These are astronomical figures to fall on the shoulders of those living in the development. With only £5,000 offered by Ballymore”—[*Official Report*, 1 February 2021; Vol. 688, c. 707.]

I regret to inform the House that I had mistyped this number in my speech, and that the figure I should have stated is £500,000. As soon as it was brought to my attention, I sought to inform the House of this correction and to apologise. I am most grateful to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for graciously enabling me to do so.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I am sure that the House is grateful to the hon. Member for taking the earliest opportunity to place that correction on the record. We will leave it there.

BILL PRESENTED

DRIVING TESTS (REPAYMENT OF TEST FEES) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Kirsten Oswald, supported by Anne McLaughlin and David Linden, presented a Bill to authorise the repayment of fees for driving tests delayed as a result of an emergency.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 250).

Local Welfare Assistance Provision (Review)

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

3.53 pm

Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con) [V]: I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require the Government to undertake a review of the adequacy of local welfare assistance schemes provided by local authorities.

This Bill would require local councils to publicise their local welfare assistance schemes and account for how they have spent the money allocated to them. It would require the Government to provide support and guidance to councils on best practice, eligibility criteria and scheme design, and would review the impact of the pandemic on the sufficiency of schemes.

Local authorities, as we all know, play a key role in providing a local welfare safety net, and they have made a superhuman effort in recent months during the pandemic to make this a success. They are well placed for this role; they already have existing financial relationships with their residents, such as through council tax collection, and they have a wealth of data about those residents. Combined with other forms of financial support that they provide through council tax reduction schemes and discretionary housing payments, a well-funded and administrated local welfare assistance scheme means that local authorities can act as a first point of call for individuals in need. By running an effective scheme, they can also act as a central hub for signposting to voluntary sector organisations that can offer additional support.

We must note the scale of need at the moment, even before the pandemic. With so many in often unfurnished private rented properties, it is no wonder that more than 1 million people are lacking a cooker, fridge freezer or washing machine. It is also no wonder that so many find themselves turning to food banks and other forms of emergency food aid. Many of those being helped are people experiencing sudden, unexpected and traumatic change in their daily lives; some are fleeing domestic violence, whereas there are others whose financial precariousness sees them quickly lose both job and accommodation, with many finding themselves in communities with high levels of transience and insecure tenancies.

Let us think about some of the underlying statistics: low-income families have an average of only £95 in savings; and some 40% of those aged 20 to 29 have no savings at all. These sorts of situations reinforce the so-called “poverty premium”—that is a phrase I dislike—which is increasingly prevalent. For example, where someone has no cooker it may mean that they spend more on costly takeaway meals if they are “time poor”. Having no washing machine might mean someone paying £4 down the launderette, and £3 for the dryer, rather than 25p for an average home wash. Local welfare assistance schemes, importantly, offer timely support, but it should be a wider challenge to policymakers to find ways to incentivise small or even tiny amounts of saving to improve financial resilience over time.

The Government have recognised the value of local support for families and individuals facing a financial crisis during the covid-19 pandemic. The £63 million emergency assistance grant over the summer and the

£170 million covid winter grant scheme, which ends in the spring, have enabled local authorities to scale up their offer in response to increased demand. The short-term funding has been a welcome boost to council provision, although the effectiveness of delivery has probably been dependent, to some degree, on the existing mechanisms authorities had in place prior to covid-19; there is some evidence in respect of local authorities that already had a robust LWAS in place. There has already been a commitment to review this, and the Government need to make sure they publish their emergency assistance grant review as soon as possible, to make a helpful contribution to understanding the effectiveness of local welfare provision as a whole.

Political debate often focuses on the adequacy of Government funding, and much argument occurred over the replacement of the social fund in 2013. Views will differ across the House on the adequacy or otherwise of the £120 million allocated under the most recent local government funding settlement, but I hope we can find some consensus on the fact that it is worrying that, as charity Turn2us has found, only 39% of what has been allocated has been spent on the intended purpose of providing local welfare assistance. The Children's Society found that, pre-pandemic, 23 of 157 upper tier local authorities no longer ran LWAS; a further 16 spent less than 10% of what was allocated to them; and only six operated the full wraparound service that represents best practice—I do, however, suspect that more will do so now, post-pandemic.

If ring-fencing is not Government policy any more, there should at least be transparency and accountability as to how councils choose to spend the money allocated to them for this purpose. Without that, it is hard to assess the adequacy or otherwise of government spending. There needs to be much clearer guidance on what best practice looks like. There should be a focus on how schemes are promoted, with a simple pathway to help that is not dependent solely on access to IT, or restricted by onerous residency requirements that deter those fleeing domestic violence, for example, or an obligation to exhaust all other charitable means of support first, which builds delay into what is already a household emergency. There needs to be better co-ordination with third sector bodies, which may provide many similar services, so as to avoid unnecessary duplication. That would also improve support for individuals and families through better joint working that focuses on crisis prevention rather than intervention after the fact, which is just what we do here in Blackpool. We should not dismiss cash as a potential solution, even if vouchers or other restrictive payment mechanisms somehow seem easier for providers. Better data collection and monitoring would then help the Department for Work and Pensions properly understand levels of actual need and better target funding.

We need clearer advice, best practice and guidance from the Department to share with local authorities, but we also need better co-ordination among third sector

funders to exploit economies of scale and start to build strong links with local government and to forge corporate partnerships to deliver those economies of scale that will make the funding go as far as it possibly can. From professional bodies such as Perennial, who care for those in the horticultural sector, and religious groups such as St Vincent de Paul or Quaker Social Action home care, to very local groups such as the Foxton Dispensary and the Blackpool Ladies' Sick Poor Association in my own area, there are myriad providers out there. The Association of Charitable Organisations counts some 800 in this field alone. The overlapping tapestry of voluntary support is highly creditable to our nation's sense of collective endeavour, but together they can achieve so much more as part of a wraparound best practice model that in turn reduces longer-term costs for councils and social housing providers.

I know that the Minister is not present, but I hope that he may see a copy of the speech at some point, and I would welcome the opportunity to discuss his plans for the future of local welfare assistance services. I am grateful for the assistance of Turn2Us, in particular, in having thought up the detail of this proposal, but also to the Child Poverty Action Group, the Children's Society and the Local Government Association, whose quantitative research has formed a compelling evidence base on the issue.

I am sure that all Members across the House can cite examples in their constituencies of families and individuals who, in the current crisis, have been confronted by unexpected challenges in which caseworkers have had to work amazingly hard to find solutions that work for them. An effective network of local welfare assistance schemes should be one of many legacies that emerge from this time of national emergency as we seek to build back better.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I have been given no indication that anybody intends to oppose the ten-minute rule Bill, so I intend to put the question.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Paul Maynard, Sir Iain Duncan Smith, Stephen Timms, Robert Halfon, Caroline Lucas, Peter Aldous, Jason McCartney, Andrew Selous, Gary Sambrook and Simon Fell present the Bill.

Paul Maynard accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 251).

Mr Deputy Speaker: We have already had the Dispatch Boxes sanitised, but in order to allow the safe entry and exit of MPs and Ministers, we will suspend for just one minute.

4.3 pm

Sitting suspended.

Air Traffic Management and Unmanned Aircraft Bill [Lords]

Second Reading

4.5 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Bill deals with air traffic management and unmanned aircraft, which I am sure will be of great interest to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and to all Members of the House as we look towards the future of aviation.

The UK aviation sector is a global leader, and for an island nation it plays a vital role in connecting us to the rest of the world. It is an engine of trade and investment. It allows business to connect and tourists to visit all parts of the UK, and lets our citizens explore the world, and visit family and friends. Aviation has long been at the heart of the United Kingdom's economic success, which is why the Government's most immediate priority is to combat covid-19 and get the aviation sector safely up and running once again. We must also look to, and prepare for, the future. Aviation will recover, and it will grow, and grow sustainably, over the years and decades ahead. As passenger demand recovers, it is more important than ever to consider ways to future-proof our air space, which is a key part of our national transport infrastructure.

The Bill will introduce measures to support the much needed modernisation of our airspace, update the air traffic licensing framework to bring it in line with best practice, provide alleviation from the requirement to use slots at co-ordinated airports 80% of the time for them to be retained in the following scheduling period, and provide greater enforcement powers to help the police to tackle the unlawful use of unmanned aircraft.

Airspace modernisation is a critical infrastructure programme of national importance. The benefits of redesigning these motorways in the sky are significant for all those who use and are affected by airspace. The UK's airspace is some of the most complex in the world, yet there has been little change to its overall structure since the 1950s. Upgrading it is essential to open up airspace for all users, including general aviation flyers and new types of aircraft such as drones or, as they are properly called, unmanned aircraft.

The Bill will limit the aircraft noise experienced by local communities, and reduce traffic delays when demand returns. Without change, predictions show that by 2030 a third of flights could be unnecessarily delayed by an average of 30 minutes, which is 72 times higher than in 2015. Critically, the emissions savings that modernisation will deliver are a key component of the UK's commitment to reach net zero by 2050.

Unquestionably, 2020 was the toughest ever year for commercial aviation, but the need for modernisation has not changed. It is a long-term programme to future-proof against long-term demand, growth and change. However, the route to modernisation will change. In view of the pandemic and its effects on the aviation industry, most airports have temporarily paused their work on airspace change. But there will come a time, in the not-too-distant future, I hope, when the airspace change programme will be revitalised. The provisions in part 1 of the Bill will be critical to the success of that programme when that time comes.

The UK's airspace is highly interdependent, particularly over the south-east region. For airspace change to take place, airports or other persons involved in airspace change have to work together and take account of the needs of neighbouring airports as well as their own. If one airport pulls out, it could delay the whole modernisation programme. Should that situation occur, neither the Government nor the Civil Aviation Authority currently has the powers to guarantee that airspace change is taken forward. Given the complex and interdependent nature of the airspace change proposals required for modernisation, the powers in the Bill are necessary to avoid any sponsor holding up another airspace change proposal or, potentially, the whole programme.

The current challenges facing the aviation sector are extraordinary, so let me reassure Members that the powers in part 1 of the Bill are only intended to be used as a last resort if airspace changes are not taken forward voluntarily or at the requisite pace. The Government do not intend to use these powers where delays are due to factors outside a sponsor's control—for example, as a result of covid-19. The Bill also contains procedural safeguards for the potential recipient of a direction to progress or co-operate in an airspace change proposal—an ACP—designed to ensure that any direction is proportionate and robustly justified.

I turn to part 2 of the Bill. It has been more than 20 years since the establishment of an economic regulatory regime for the provision of en route air traffic control services. During that time, the technological and economic landscape of air traffic services has changed dramatically. The provisions in part 2 will modernise the regulatory regime for the provision of en route air traffic services provided by NATS En Route plc—or NERL, as it called—and regulated by the CAA. That will ensure that the framework remains fit for purpose and continues to build on the UK's excellent safety record.

The Bill will allow the CAA to take a more direct and independent approach. It will enable changes to licence conditions considered necessary to protect consumers and respond to changes in air traffic services over time. It also updates the enforcement and penalties regime to ensure that the CAA can effectively regulate NERL in the interests of users and consumers. That includes the introduction of proportionate sanctions, which brings the regulatory regime into line with other modern regulatory systems.

Part 2 of the Bill also includes provisions relating to airport slot alleviation specifically in response to the covid-19 pandemic. The alleviation of slots at capacity-constrained airports is governed by retained EU regulation 95/93. There are eight slot co-ordinated or level 3 airports in the UK: Birmingham, Bristol, Gatwick, Heathrow, London City, Luton, Manchester and Stansted. Regulation 95/93 requires airlines with allocated slots at level 3 airports to use those slots at least 80% of the time in the preceding scheduling period in order to retain their slot in the upcoming equivalent period. In ordinary circumstances, that 80:20 rule, or "use it or lose it" rule, encourages the efficient use of scarce airport capacity, while allowing airlines a degree of flexibility in their operations. However, owing to the unprecedented impact of covid-19, the European Commission waived the 80:20 rule for the summer 2020 season. That was subsequently extended to cover winter 2020-21. The UK supported the European Commission's position. That alleviation has helped to

protect future connectivity and airline finances and reduce the risk of ghost flights being run to retain slots, with all the consequent environmental impact and unnecessary expenditure that that would have.

However, it is with regret that the Government anticipate that the effects of covid-19 on the aviation industry will continue for some time to come. Passenger demand is not predicted to return to 2019 levels until at least 2023, and the retained powers of regulation 95/93 were expressly limited to 2 April 2021. Part 2 therefore provides the Secretary of State with a power, exercisable until 24 August 2024, to waive the 80:20 rule beyond 2 April 2021. It also includes a power to set alternative ratios to the 80:20 rule for a specified scheduling period or season, and allows the Secretary of State to apply conditions to an alleviation of the 80:20 rule, such as by setting a deadline for the return of slots not intended for operation. As we expect disruption to air travel to continue for several years, it is imperative that the UK has the necessary powers at its disposal to provide alleviation beyond the summer 2021 season should the evidence suggest that it is warranted.

I now turn to part 3. Hon. Members will have seen the positive uses of unmanned aircraft, often referred to as drones, during the covid-19 pandemic, such as trialling the flying of medical supplies to the Isle of Mull and the Isle of Wight. The Government are committed to harnessing the positive impacts of unmanned aircraft and supporting this growing industry, but it must be done in a way that protects the safety and security of people, other aircraft, and sensitive sites. The careless, inconsiderate and malicious use of drones and other unmanned aircraft continues to pose a safety risk to others.

The provisions in part 3 therefore provide new and additional police powers to tackle the unlawful use of unmanned aircraft. The police will be able to issue a fixed penalty notice for less serious offending—for example, where a person had flown too close to uninvolved people but not caused, or intended to cause, any harm. They will also be given the necessary powers to require an unmanned aircraft to be grounded, to use stop and search, and to enter and search premises under warrant for certain offences relating to unmanned aircraft.

In addition, we are providing for the use of counter-unmanned aircraft technology that interferes with property or wireless telegraphy for the purposes of detecting and preventing certain offences involving unmanned aircraft. We are adding the civil nuclear constabulary and senior management for prisons to the list of those who can authorise the use of this technology, allowing them better to protect sites such as nuclear sites and prisons. The provisions in part 3 have been developed with the Home Office and the National Police Chiefs Council on behalf of UK police forces. They will address operational gaps in police powers and ensure that offenders who use unmanned aircraft for unlawful purposes are dealt with more effectively and appropriately in order to maintain public safety and security.

In summary, this Bill will future-proof the aviation sector by creating simpler and more efficient routes, reduce congestion while assisting aviation to meet its climate change targets, and ensure the safe use of our skies. At a time when we are so often concerned with the cares of the present, this is an opportunity to shape the future of aviation. I warmly welcome the House's attention to the Bill.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Before I call Mr Kane, let me say that some very sad news has broken that Captain Sir Tom Moore has sadly died. On behalf of the House of Commons, can I pass on our deepest condolences to his family? He brought joy to the nation. He was an inspiration to everybody in this country, and his achievement was properly recognised by a knighthood, which was movingly presented by Her Majesty the Queen in person at a special ceremony. I know that the entire nation will mourn his passing.

4.19 pm

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Mr Deputy Speaker, that is very sad news indeed. Some people are born great, some people achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them. I think Sir Tom was probably all three of those things; I am sure the Minister will concur when he comes back to the Dispatch Box a little later. He was an inspiration to the whole nation at a time of crisis, and a real candle in the gloom for the British people. I wholeheartedly concur with your comments, Mr Deputy Speaker.

It is great that you are chairing this debate, Mr Deputy Speaker, because I know personally of your aviation expertise. You have been a great support to me, as the constituency MP for Manchester airport over the years, as I chaired the friends of Manchester airport group. I have been genuinely grateful for all your help throughout that time.

Turning to the matter at hand, I must first thank Members of the other place for their tireless and diligent work in getting this important Bill through to this stage. It was certainly a long process there, but we can all largely agree that it was well worth it in the end. As the Minister has said, the Bill will grant the Government powers to modernise UK airspace, update the licensing of air traffic control and give police new powers over the misuse of drones. Those three areas have all been in need of updating in recent years, so I am pleased to support the Bill receiving its Second Reading today and look forward to it completing its remaining stages.

I share the Minister's ambition for airspace modernisation. The country has essentially been managing its airspace with analogue technology from the previous century, with piecemeal updates as demand ballooned over the past few decades—an analogue system in a digital age.

I commend the Civil Aviation Authority, which is nearing its 50th anniversary, for everything it has done and continues to do to maintain exemplary safety standards in the sector, such that, as the now-clichéd line goes, the riskiest part of flying has become going to and from the airport. Our creaking airspace management has many inefficiencies, most importantly constraints on the volume of flights and needless burning of extra fuel as jets circle round and round before landing. Clearly, few of us need convincing that modernising the airspace should be a priority, and the Bill provides the Department for Transport with powers to ensure that that happens. I fully support that principle.

The second part of the Bill, which involves the regulation of air traffic control services, is also welcome, though the circumstances that brought it about are not: two recent air traffic system failures, a voice communication system failure in December 2013 and a computer system

[Mike Kane]

failure in December 2014. I was thankful that there were no accidents or safety concerns over the handling of the incidents themselves.

The Minister and I have discussed airport slots at length, including during consideration of a recent statutory instrument on the temporary extension of a waiver on slot regulations owing to the covid-19 pandemic. I am content that the Bill, through clause 12, will continue to provide the Government with the tools to tackle airport slot allocations issues arising from the pandemic.

The third part of the Bill—providing further police powers over the use of unmanned aircraft—is long overdue. As technology has moved on, drones have become more common, and it was only a matter of time before an incident such as that at Gatwick airport in 2018 disrupted air traffic. Such incidents and others, at prisons and elsewhere, will only increase if the use of drones is not more adequately policed. I therefore welcome the additional police powers in the Bill.

We support the principles in the Bill, but there are a few areas of concern, which I hope to work on with the Minister and Members in Committee. Principally, I have concerns about the scope of the powers that will be conferred on the Secretary of State for Transport by part 1; the Minister referred to that in his speech. If a specific definition of the Government's enforcement powers is not set down, this Department, or a future Department, might be able to use them for other airspace purposes. That issue was raised by the Airport Operators Association and I ask the Minister to address it. Why is the scope of the power so broad?

The second issue, bluntly, is where the money will come from for this airspace change programme. I understand that this is not a money Bill and things might have changed recently, but ACOG—the Airspace Change Organising Group, which is managing this ambitious modernisation programme—has not received full funding promised by the Government to proceed with its work. The Minister might care to address that point.

It is necessary to acknowledge that capital spending is at a record low in an aviation sector that has been so thoroughly gutted by the covid-19 pandemic. It may be a step too far to require airports to stump up the cash for this at the current time. It seems to me that the Government could start the process. Has the Minister considered funding phase 1 of the programme? Is he looking at mechanisms to finance this vital airspace change programme?

Finally for today, I would like to raise a query about the Bill providing the police with greater powers to enforce unmanned aircraft safety. My concerns are that this is not matched with the appropriate resource to effectively use these new powers. While this is out of the scope of the Bill, I ask the Minister what further steps he and his Department will take to ensure that the correct investment and resource are made available by Government. I look forward to working with the Minister and Members of the House to bring this important and timely Bill through to the next stages.

4.25 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con) [V]: I am very pleased to be able to speak on this Bill, because London Luton airport employs a great number

of my constituents. The town of Leighton Buzzard and the villages of Heath and Reach, Billington, Stanbridge, Tilsforth, Eaton Bray and, in particular, Whipsnade, Studham and Kensworth are all overflowed by planes coming in to land at London Luton airport. Indeed, I see them from my garden. I was delighted to learn on Friday that London Luton airport is able to claim up to £8 million from the airport and ground operations support scheme. That is much needed and very good news for our area.

I initiated the Westminster Hall debate on the work of the Jet Zero Council on 14 October last year. It was during my research for that debate that I realised the contribution of airspace modernisation to the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions from aviation. I met the Airspace Change Organising Group, which first alerted me to the fact that flight paths are now part of our critical national infrastructure and are, as the Minister said, highways in the sky. However, I would be grateful if he can confirm that the ACOG will get the money it needs to finish the job. I think the matter may be with our friends at the Treasury, and if he wants some assistance with that, I am sure that we would all be delighted to give him a hand.

If we get airspace change right, there are huge benefits to be realised. As the Minister said, aircraft frequently fly further than necessary on routes that follow sub-optimal climb and descent profiles, burning more fuel and creating additional greenhouse gas emissions. The environmental benefits of getting this right are enormous. Aircraft will be able to fly more direct routes, with quicker climbs to energy-efficient cruising altitudes and later descents to help to reduce emissions as well as provide opportunities to reduce the noise footprint on the ground. That will be hugely welcomed by many of my constituents, as indeed will the work of Dame Ann Dowling's silent aircraft initiative in Cambridge.

Upgrading our airspace is a key part of building back better and contributing to a cleaner recovery for the UK economy. Current forecasts show that modernising airspace in the UK offers the potential to reduce future aviation emissions by up to 20%—a fifth—by 2050, which would be one of the most substantive contributions. It is also crucial for supporting the UK's economic recovery from the pandemic. It will ensure that our future air transport networks deliver the necessary resilience to shocks and the efficiency to underpin aviation's vital role in driving the UK's global connectivity and economic recovery.

For the millions of passengers who will return to the skies in the future, upgrading UK airspace will help to prevent potential delays, reduce congestion and make travel easier and more efficient for us all. As the Minister said—and it bears repetition—failure to take action would mean that one in three flights arriving or leaving an airport was likely to be delayed by an average of half an hour by 2030. That would be 72 times worse than it was in 2015 and would be very damaging for passengers, businesses and the environment.

The airspace change programme will also strengthen the sustainability, resilience and competitiveness of regional air travel, which serves towns and cities throughout the United Kingdom. Regional air travel is a very important enabler for a balanced economic recovery, empowering local tourism, business, and international trade. I want us to get to jet zero as soon as possible, which is why the

work of the new Whittle laboratory in Cambridge and companies such as Zero Avia, which is based in Bedfordshire and completed the world's first hydrogen passenger flight last September, are so important. Sustainable aviation fuels obviously play a key role, as well.

The airspace change programme will also enable the United Kingdom to integrate seamlessly into the global system, and it is essential to accommodate unmanned aircraft systems and electric urban mobility aircraft as well. I want to ask the Minister about the UK's plans for satellite air traffic control, because I understand from Dr Adam Camilletti of the Whittle laboratory that aircraft can now be tracked anywhere in the world by orbiting satellites, which until recently was only possible when they were close to a land-based air traffic control. Specifically, this means that aircraft can be actively rerouted, allowing them to use the jet stream more optimally and avoid areas where aircraft-induced clouds are most harmful. The separation between aircraft over the oceans can also be reduced, which would allow planes to use the jet stream more efficiently. What is really important is that these changes could significantly reduce the climate effects of aviation in the relatively short term.

The relevance of these new possibilities is that, as the Government now own OneWeb, that system could be used as a global aircraft tracking constellation. This would allow the United Kingdom to show leadership in tackling climate change while capitalising on our investment in OneWeb. I am aware that the UK national air traffic systems are already pioneering a similar approach with a Canadian company, Aireon. If the UK has first-mover advantage with this satellite technology, we could create a lot of jobs, which has never been more necessary than as we emerge from this pandemic. I would be very grateful if the Minister could address this issue in his closing remarks.

4.32 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP) [V]: On behalf of the SNP, I very much echo the comments about Captain Sir Tom Moore. He led an extraordinary life with an absolutely wonderful finale, and his work over this past year will never be forgotten. My condolences to his family and friends.

I welcome the fact that the legislation to put airspace change and modernisation on a statutory footing is finally before us, and I agree with any extension of the 80/20 slots rule as well. I would prefer it, however, if other factors such as employment conditions were also used as criteria when allocating slots. I also welcome the increase in powers for the police and prison officers to tackle drone flights. While drone supply flights into prisons is not currently a big problem in Scotland, it is growing, with more than half of Scottish prisons recording incidents involving drones, as well as evidence from the recovery of drug packages that other flights are going undetected.

The carnage caused by drug addiction in wider society is magnified still further in prison. Drone technology has allowed those who profit from this misery to evade security measures in our prisons, so giving the police and prison authorities the power to intervene and stop the supply at its source is a welcome development that will receive approval from the Scottish Parliament after Royal Assent. I also hope there will be improved investment

for police forces and the Prison Service in England and Wales, to allow them to use these powers properly and proportionately, and allowing Scotland the Barnett consequential to make the same investment.

The flipside of the harmful use of drones is their positive use in logistics and distribution if properly managed and regulated, and I hope that the Bill will do just that. AGS Airports, which owns and manages Glasgow airport in my constituency, along with Aberdeen and Southampton airports, is leading a consortium that will develop and trial what will be the UK's first national distribution network to use drones to transport essential medicines, blood, organs and other medical supplies throughout Scotland. The consortium of 14 organisations, including the University of Strathclyde, NATS and Connected Places Catapult, has secured £1.5 million from the industrial strategy future flight challenge fund to demonstrate how autonomous drone technology can enhance access to essential medical supplies, particularly in rural parts of Scotland.

The project started in December last year and will involve live drone flight trials in addition to developing the ground infrastructure needed to recharge the drones and the systems to control them. A key aspect of the project, which dovetails rather well with other parts of the Bill, will be designing pathways to ensure that drones can safely share airspace with civil aviation. Derek Provan, the chief executive of AGS, has said:

"This project has the potential to completely revolutionise the way in which healthcare services are delivered in Scotland."

Karen Bell, the head of research and development for NHS Ayrshire and Arran, has said:

"NHS Ayrshire & Arran are excited to be leading on the delivery of this project on behalf of the West of Scotland Innovation Hub. This is an opportunity to work with aviation colleagues to explore the innovative use of drone technology to address some of the potential challenges facing daily delivery of NHS services, not only within NHS Ayrshire & Arran but across the West of Scotland."

We often hear of drones in a negative light, be that in their use in warfare, in closing airports as we saw at Gatwick, or in reported near misses with aircraft, but it is clear that they can provide many positives within a fairly and well-regulated framework.

The changes to airspace that the Bill paves the way for are absolutely vital, as previous speakers and the Minister have outlined. Given the exponential growth in aviation over the decades, it will come as a surprise to many that the management of our skies dates back to a plan conceived and implemented in the 1950s, before the age of the super jumbo, when British European Airways and BOAC ruled the skies over the UK. There can be no argument but that the airspace management framework currently in place requires urgent review and a new policy and plan that will hopefully last for the long run.

Of course, many of the necessary technical improvements have been put in place or are in the pipeline, including the ITEC system at NATS in Prestwick. ITEC stands for interoperability through European collaboration, and it forms the basis of the two equal parts of the next generation of traffic management: software technology, including flight data processing; and the controller working position. This technology will strengthen safety and increase efficiency, and therefore improve the environmental impact of flights through more detailed planning of all

[Gavin Newlands]

flights' trajectories. It will also enhance interoperability between European control centres, allowing us to share those detailed trajectories to optimise aircraft flights across borders.

I welcome the Government's commitment to ensuring that we have a modern and efficient airspace fit for the 21st century, but I am concerned about the gap that has been left in the plans for airspace management. Giving the Civil Aviation Authority and the Department for Transport legal authority and powers is one thing—I take the Minister at his word on hoping not to use them—but that will mean nothing if there are no actual plans to implement. That is the danger caused by the pandemic that is faced by the Airspace Change Organising Group. The financial devastation unleashed on the industry has meant a funding shortfall of around £8 million from what was needed for the group to continue and complete its work. That work has been ongoing for three years now. Given the sums sloshing about the Treasury in recent months, £8 million is a comparative drop in the ocean, and the economic boost and increase in efficiency that the airspace modernisation programme will bring is far in excess of that. It would be ludicrous if the last three years' work by the group had to be binned for lack of that bridging cash to allow the group to finish its work and ensure that our airspace was fit for the 21st century.

Another strong point that has been alluded to is that, like the rest of our transport infrastructure, aviation needs investment and renewal for the long term. Given the rebuilding of our economic future that is needed as we come out of the pandemic, strategic support is crucial to a sustainable future for aviation and the hundreds of thousands of jobs it supports.

Airports and the wider industry want to see a more efficient use of airspace, not simply to funnel more flights in, but to minimise the impact of noise and pollution on local communities and to ensure the best environment so that direct links from regional airports to Europe and beyond can be viable, reducing unnecessary transit at overloaded hub airports such as Heathrow. Penny-pinching by the Treasury simply will not cut it, and I hope this will not happen. I urge the Minister to lobby his colleagues to come up with the cash to allow this crucial work to be done properly and come to a proper conclusion. While he is doing so, he could look at the precipice that the industry is staring over, without any real prospect of recovery even beginning until late summer or more likely the autumn. The sector needs proper support, and it needed it yesterday.

I take this opportunity again to urge the Secretary of State to ensure that the Airspace Change Organising Group is given a seat at the Jet Zero table. One key outcome of the airspace modernisation strategy will be a reduction in carbon emissions through increased efficiency in the skies. It is also the cheapest and easiest win with regard to carbon reduction. It seems an oversight, therefore, to leave the group out of top-tier discussions about how aviation can contribute to a low and zero-carbon future, particularly as we approach the COP26 summit in Glasgow. I hope that is on the Department's radar and a clear mistake can be remedied as soon as possible.

In concluding, the Scottish Parliament passed a legislative consent motion on a previous incarnation of the Bill, and I hope that, pending discussions between the UK

and Scottish Governments on police and Prison Service powers, the Scottish Parliament will again give consent for the measures in the Bill.

4.41 pm

Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con) [V]: I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), and I welcome his support for this Bill. I start by congratulating the Minister on his appointment to this important role, on his contribution this afternoon and on explaining so clearly the objectives of this necessary Bill.

Like many in the House, I welcome the objectives of the Bill to update the legislative framework for the control of civilian UK airspace. Through the modernisation of airspace, we can reduce carbon emissions from aviation, reduce the impact of flightpaths and tackle the misuse of unmanned aircraft, such as drones. It is particularly fitting that after some years of delay, largely through the intervention of the general election in 2019, this Bill is being brought to the House on the very day that Professor Sir Partha Dasgupta publishes his seminal review on the economics of biodiversity.

Aviation plays a vital part in our economy, but it is crucial that we find a way to reduce its environmental impact. While that is not the primary purpose of the Bill, it is a necessary and fundamental ancillary benefit. Inefficient flightpaths set some decades ago will lead to longer travel times for passengers and freight traffic and therefore greater carbon dioxide emissions from flights. Airspace modernisation, if robust, can play a part in helping the UK meet our net zero obligations by 2050.

I want to use my brief contribution today to highlight the potential impact of flightpaths over those parts of our landmass that have a special place in nature and are designated as areas of special significance, including the national parks, areas of outstanding natural beauty and sites of special scientific interest. They are areas that we as a nation have designated as being of sufficient importance to warrant additional protection. It seems to me that when the impact of noise pollution is well known, we should ensure that such areas continue to be protected as much as possible through any changes to flightpaths.

I place on record my thanks to my noble Friend Lord Randall of Uxbridge for tabling an amendment to this Bill that would have precluded aircraft from flying below 7,000 feet over areas of outstanding natural beauty, except for the purposes of safety or landing and take-off from airports and airfields. Seven thousand feet is the point at which noise is considered by the Civil Aviation Authority to be a pertinent consideration when designing flightpaths.

While Lord Randall did not press the amendment to a Division, he did refer in the debate on 22 January in the other place to some written questions I had asked of the then Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst), and I will briefly comment on her responses. I am aware that existing air navigation guidance suggests that

“where practicable, it is desirable that airspace routes below 7,000 feet should seek to avoid flying over Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and National Parks.”

That is welcome, so far as it goes, but it frankly does not go very far. Many people would like to see the limit raised to a higher threshold. Even at the existing height restriction, there appears to be almost nothing in the

way of sanction should the advice be ignored. I recognise that it will not be possible for flights to avoid all AONBs and national parks—Gatwick is surrounded by them, for example—but I would like further reassurance from the Minister about the redress or sanctions available should civilian aircraft fly lower than they should.

There may be a tool at hand to help him. I warmly welcome the establishment in 2019 of the Independent Commission on Civil Aviation Noise, under the leadership of head commissioner Rob Light, to provide some transparent and independent advice in the aircraft noise debate. While it is clearly early days, ICCAN's ambitions are welcome.

In the foreword to his first corporate strategy, Mr Light said:

“Welcome action is being taken by UK Government, the aviation industry and others to address climate change and reduce carbon emissions. I believe that aviation noise must also be considered by the industry and Government as a major issue, alongside climate change.”

I agree with him. Given that we are proposing changing flight paths, it is prudent for us to have robust information about how noise will impact the public and the natural world that we are trying to protect on the ground. While not interfering with its independence, I urge the Minister to ensure that ICCAN's remit includes engaging not only with communities adjacent to airports, airfields and their flight paths, but those responsible for managing our designated landscapes, national parks and AONBs, and wider areas likely to be impacted adversely by noise.

I have been contacted by a number of constituents over the past couple of years complaining of increased civilian air traffic. They live within the Shropshire Hills AONB, which covers some 300 square miles—half of my constituency of Ludlow. They have seen, and in some cases recorded, an increase in flight numbers, particularly during the summer of 2019, which was prior to the pandemic—flight numbers will clearly have declined during the pandemic. They found it very difficult to secure information on the cause of the increase, details of aircraft movements at different heights or what could be done about it. Given that challenge, with exemptions to freedom of information requests for several civil aviation bodies, I urge the Minister to consider whether the application of FOI exemptions in this area remains appropriate, for the sake of greater public transparency.

I welcome the measures concerning unmanned aircraft and drones in part 3 of the Bill. It is clear that this nascent but rapidly growing industry has a strong future with huge applications, from which we will all derive significant benefit. I am particularly interested to see how, for example, drones are already being used to monitor environmental change and the impact of pollution.

However, we have already seen the ability of drones to disrupt people's lives, including the notable incident at Gatwick airport in 2018, when more than 1,000 flights were impacted by a drone sitting close to the runway, so we must consider carefully how we can maintain public safety from malicious actors using drones in ways that are dangerous to public health or safety. I welcome the measures in the Bill to do that, but I urge the Minister to ensure that he has sufficient flexibility through the Bill and its regulations to keep up to date with emerging technology, to ensure small unmanned aircraft or drones can be identified in flight and safely grounded, if necessary, by police, prison or other relevant security services. I look forward to supporting the Bill this evening.

4.49 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab) [V]: Like you, Mr Deputy Speaker, I want to express my sadness at the loss of Captain Tom Moore and send my condolences to his family.

It is a privilege to follow the right hon. Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne), who has campaigned so steadily on these issues to protect our environment.

Let me be clear. I welcome the aim of the Bill, which, as it states in the briefing, is:

“to deliver quicker, quieter and cleaner journeys.”

Whether the Bill's further aim of delivering more capacity is compatible with “quieter and cleaner journeys” has yet to be seen and yet to be proved. Assessing the past performance and the current practice of the aviation industry leads us to be extremely sceptical that the continued expansion of capacity will enable the aviation sector to be cleaner and quieter. As we hopefully bring the covid pandemic under control in the coming period, there is obviously an urgent need now to address the next imminent crisis, which is the existential threat of climate change. If the aviation industry is to play its part in tackling climate change, the Government must be equipped with the powers to drive through the necessary changes to aviation practices.

The Bill does take a first step in seeking those powers and I welcome it in that respect. The problem is that it is yet another piecemeal measure without the context of an overarching strategy for aviation to secure an economically and environmentally viable future for the industry. The Government promised they would publish, in 2020, an aviation White Paper, “Aviation 2050”, to spell out their views and plans for the future of aviation. I appreciate and understand why the impact of the covid crisis has delayed the White Paper—I am happy to cut the Government some slack on that one. However, we have also been repeatedly promised, since last March, that the Government would at least come forward with an interim sector strategy that would see the industry through the pandemic and lay the foundations for the future. It is disappointing that that has not been forthcoming. Instead, there has just been a steady drip of unco-ordinated announcements of short-term support schemes.

Apart from this tardy and piecemeal sticking plaster approach, one of the worst elements of the situation is that the Government's financial support to the aviation companies has been without any conditions about the behaviour of those companies. That has allowed unprincipled companies like Heathrow Airport Ltd in effect to use taxpayers' money to treat its staff—many of my constituents—like serfs. They have seized on the crisis to impose fire and rehire tactics, cut wages, undermine working conditions and seek to break the unions.

Instead of this Bill, the Government should bring forward a comprehensive strategy that provides the support and direction to the industry to see it through the tough period it faces over the next 12 months, but also a strategy for the long term: setting out the clear objective of creating an environmentally sustainable aviation sector; setting out the parameters in which the industry will have to operate to achieve that; establishing the decision-making, implementation and regulatory structures that will successfully drive the strategy through;

[John McDonnell]

and, of course, identifying the policies and the financial support that will be available to secure what we are arguing for, which is a just transition.

The Bill is a fish out of water. It is impossible to discern how it fits into any clear strategy for a viable future for aviation. It leads to even more confusion over who does what, who leads on what and who decides on what. It fails to inspire confidence that it has taken any account of the most recent research and understanding of the social, health and environmental impacts of expanding aviation, especially the impacts of noise and air pollution. Worryingly, as a constituency MP with an airport in my constituency, it appears to sideline even further the role of local authorities and local communities in decision making.

The Bill will go through its Second Reading tonight, but it just provides yet more evidence that the Government's whole approach to the aviation industry is increasingly turning into a dog's breakfast. The people who suffer from this self-evident fiasco, which is ongoing, are, regrettably, my constituents and others. Although the Bill will go through, I hope the Government now recognise their responsibility and their promises to bring forward an aviation strategy paper, so we can properly discuss the long-term future of the sector.

4.54 pm

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con) [V]: I express my condolences to Sir Tom Moore's friends and family. He has been special in many ways, and a stellar example of how doing such an apparently small thing has influences that we could not possibly imagine.

This is Sedgefield calling Westminster control, and I apologise for not using my pilot's headset, as you would prefer, Mr Deputy Speaker. As a private pilot, I guess I should declare an interest. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all who work in providing pilots with a safe space in which to operate. Their work is critical not only for pilots, but obviously for their passengers and those on the ground. I have to say that the chances of my flying in most of the airspace we are discussing is somewhere between nil and negligible, but I do retain hope.

I will consider the three parts of this Bill. On part 1, it makes eminent sense to me that there should be a single authority to force co-operation should the parties responsible for the management of airspace be unable to agree. The Secretary of State's delegation to the CAA is an appropriate reference. Over the years, the geographical influence of the bigger airport corridors has evolved so that potential changes in one corridor are increasingly likely to have impacts on another. I know that when flying in the south-east, even as a recreational pilot, the airspace is increasingly restricted. The Bill gives the Transport Secretary new powers to ensure that airports modernise their airspace, with the power to fine those that do not implement changes quickly enough. I strongly believe that an absolute power to require the parties to progress collaboratively is wholly appropriate should it be required, but only when it is required.

Moving on to part 2, it is clear that anyone who observes traffic at the major airports is well aware of the congestion that can arise and the obvious desire to reduce the need to stack aircraft in a holding pattern

awaiting landing, which is so obviously a waste of fuel and an environmentally unfriendly process. By modernising our airspace, we can reduce the time it takes for a plane to land, meaning we cut pollution, reduce noise nuisance for the communities below and reduce delays for passengers. With appropriate tools and systems, the integration of different classes of aviation also becomes much more achievable, which should promote efficiency for all classes without introducing safety concerns. There are many challenges for the air travel business in addressing its carbon footprint and making it possible for flights to have as little wasted time in the air as possible, and this is clearly a step in the right direction.

It is necessary to update the regulatory regime for the provision of en route air traffic control services. The licensing framework under the Transport Act 2000 needs to be modernised to ensure that it remains fit for purpose, and that it continues to build on the UK's excellent safety record and to be resilient. For those living under the flight paths, the opportunity to have a system in use that provides occasional relief by redirecting flights for specific time periods will, I am sure, be welcome. In addition, there are many busy airports around the world that happily integrate general aviation and commercial flights, and these opportunities should be more achievable under more advanced systems as and when they are introduced.

My main concern today, however, is about the powers on allowing the waiver of the rule that airlines must use their allocated airport slots at least 80% of the time to avoid losing the slots in the next season. While I have no desire to encourage airlines to fly inefficient routes to retain their lucrative allocated landing slots, I must express concern that any latitude offered is restricted in its use and closely monitored.

I support giving a helping hand to airlines during the coronavirus pandemic, meaning they are not forced to fly empty planes, but the ownership of these slots has been abused in the past to frustrate opportunities for regional airports, such as Teesside in my Sedgefield constituency. While I accept that we are in peculiar times, we must still look to deliver appropriate slots for UK regional airports. I would strongly encourage that, in taking the power of the waiver, the Secretary of State recognises that in using it he needs to be cognisant of unintended consequences. It is imperative that, if he chooses to use the power of waiver, he still enables a review of slots, does not allow a full roll-over and retains a mechanism to reallocate some of those, particularly to support regional airports.

In order to level up and economically strengthen the UK's regions, it is vital that areas such as the Tees Valley are able to offer worldwide connectivity. That can only realistically be achieved by ensuring that our airport is connected to Heathrow. We have been very pleased to restore flights from Teesside to Heathrow this year. That route closed some 11 years ago, when British Midland took the long-standing Teesside slots to use on other routes. Today, the service is provided by Eastern Airways, although the airport is in the process of finalising arrangements with the UK's largest regional airline, Loganair, for it to take over operation of the route from March 2021, bringing expertise and worldwide connections that will help the route to grow and prosper. Loganair already holds the slots required for the launch in March but is currently on the waiting list for the Heathrow slots in summer 2021 and beyond. An inappropriate or

excessive waiver of the “use it or lose it” provisions would risk allowing legacy airlines to sit on slots without using them, wasting air carriage capacity at a time when we must make best use of all the resources of economic strength at our disposal.

It is critical that the UK’s airports are fully utilised and that our regions are well connected. If the wrong decision is made and the regulation is totally waived, it could be hugely damaging to entrepreneurial regional airports. The efforts of the Tees Valley Mayor, Ben Houchen, to deliver regional investment and the potential relocation of the Treasury to the Tees Valley would be enhanced by a growing opportunity for links to Heathrow, and I hope that those are not frustrated.

I would welcome the opportunity to discuss with the Minister and his officials how reforms could be conducted to help ensure that Teesside International airport has the opportunity to secure long-term connections to Heathrow for services to and from UK domestic points. I hope that the laudable efforts to support the airline industry, reduce waste and reduce the carbon footprint do not simultaneously damage the regions of the UK. Finally, having seen the disruption around Gatwick and understanding the risks of drones around prisons, I am pleased to support the measures in part 3 of the Bill. I will not drone on any further, Mr Deputy Speaker.

5.1 pm

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP) [V]: It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Sedgefield (Paul Howell). It is with sadness that we hear of the passing of Sir Tom, and I pass on my condolences to the family at this time.

It is a pleasure to take part in this debate on the Air Traffic Management and Unmanned Aircraft Bill. At the outset, I would like to thank the Minister for the opportunity to be involved in two briefing sessions on this yesterday, which were extremely informative.

Since the 1950s, airspace changes have been made in an ad hoc and piecemeal fashion, with adjustments being made in response to the growth of traffic levels. Of course, that was pre covid-19, and this is seen as a fairly good time to make changes, when there is a reduction in the number of flights. That has resulted in various inefficiencies that have put constraints on the number of flights that our airspace can accommodate. Technical advances have made it possible to increase capacity, but unfortunately, they have not necessarily made their way through to the regulatory change that the Bill will enable.

In the past, aircraft have ended up circling over airports—stacking. Many of us have sat in planes that are circling, predominantly over the south-east of England, which is probably one of the most congested airspaces in the UK. That adds to the problems of pollution and noise pollution for local residents. This Bill is an opportunity to deal with some of those issues. I represent an area where there is some manufacturing relating to the airline industry. It is important that we encourage innovation and the delivery of improvements in that area. That has been going on, and it can be seen in the form of quieter and more efficient aircraft, which will benefit the environment and those areas that are affected.

I believe that this Bill will deliver quicker, quieter and cleaner journeys. It will also increase capacity and reduce the need for stacking over airports. I listened to some of the comments made earlier with great interest, especially

those in relation to the opportunities that may exist for using satellite technology to direct planes. We should make better use of that. Such technology will help to ensure that planes are not burning fuel and that they are using the best routes. Because of technology, the separation that was added in a bygone age will not be necessary, and we should be progressing and moving on with that.

Included in the Bill are provisions to consult communities when airspace changes are being introduced. I welcome that and think that that is something that needs to be addressed. The Minister made reference to what is called “ghost flights”, which is where people fly planes just for the sake of holding a slot. The flexibility that will be introduced in relation to this, at least until August 2024, is to ensure that we are not purposefully wasting fuel, causing additional costs to airlines. As a passenger, I know how important it is to ensure that passengers get the benefit of reduced flight costs if that is possible, but that is one of the add-ons that might take a while to work its way through. I appreciate that any advances in the reduction of running costs and such like will be of benefit to all.

It was with interest that I read in the briefing notes that if we continued on the current trajectory, we would end up—I cannot remember the figure exactly—with a 72 times increase in the number of flights with a delay of more than half an hour by 2030. If that were to happen, it would be a major problem. If we can alleviate that, it would be of great help to everyone.

The second part of the Bill deals with air traffic and the licence modifications. This is an area that brings in the CAA and NATS and those involved in the operating of those modifications. Investment in new and improved radar needs to be put in place. I am working from memory here, but there is a 10-year licence, with an agreement to extend it to 15 years. In doing so, that will provide an opportunity for greater investment, because the payback time is longer. Therefore, there is an opportunity for those who want to invest. We need to encourage the introduction of the latest technology in our aviation industry. I am not saying that our industry is not safe; we have some of the safest airports in the world, and it is important that we maintain that. Bringing forward a Bill such as this will help us to stay at the top of the tree in this area. Those are all positive things.

Let me move on now to the third part of the Bill. Mention has been made of the 2018 debacle at Gatwick Airport and the difficulty that it caused. I and two of my staff were impacted by what happened on that day—that very eventful day. Drones are a wonderful invention and can be very positive, but legislation needs to be put in place to deal with those who want to misuse them. The police require additional powers to enforce that legislation. The idea of no-fly zones for drones also needs to be considered and the Bill goes towards giving us some assurance in this area.

Another issue that needs to be looked at—this was mentioned yesterday in the briefing session—is those who use laser pens. This causes major problems. We have to focus on what is operating in aerospace and the effect on commercial airlines flying over densely populated areas. We need to do everything in our power not only in respect of issuing fines but to give the police and those who are responsible the teeth to be able to go after those who abuse such equipment and create problems. Some people do it wilfully. Mention has been made of being

[Paul Girvan]

able to identify drones by giving them a specific ID relating to the people who buy them and ensuring that those people are licensed and have adequate competency to use such vehicles. We do not pursue strongly enough those who cause problems and the penalties should definitely reflect how serious the effects could be and how many people's lives could be affected by such abuse.

The Bill covers those who abuse drones by using them to smuggle things into prisons and all sorts of things. We have to have measures in place and that needs to be covered in the Bill. There is a common-sense approach to many of the issues we have discussed. I believe we should look at every Bill and ask, "Does this make sense?" As far as I am concerned, the Bill goes a long way to address something that needs to be reformed and brought into the 21st century. We need to ensure that the law is fit for purpose. I will support the Bill this evening.

5.11 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con) [V]: May I associate myself with your comments, Mr Deputy Speaker, about Captain Sir Tom Moore? It is a sad loss for our country and, of course, especially for his family. Our thoughts and prayers are with them.

It is a privilege to speak in this debate as I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on general aviation, the Member of Parliament who represents Cornwall Airport Newquay, and a keen supporter of our aviation sector and especially our regional airports. I very much welcome the Bill and will be pleased to support it later this evening. I acknowledge all the work that the Minister and previous Ministers have put in, along with officials in the Department, to get us to this point. It has taken longer than we expected because of a number of factors, but the approach that the Department has taken—to engage and listen to stakeholders across the aviation sector—has been hugely welcomed and, along with the input from the other place, means that the Bill before us is a very good one.

The UK's airspace is our invisible infrastructure in the sky. It is vital to the success of our aviation sector and the wider economy. It will become increasingly important in the years to come, with the development of clean flights through clean fuels and electric and hydrogen-powered flight. In recent times, there have been those who have prophesied the demise of aviation in the light of the need to reduce our carbon footprint, but I believe that its best days lie ahead. The industry is committed to playing a key part in helping the UK to achieve the Government's ambitious aims on cutting our carbon emissions, and good progress is being made.

Although the sector has taken a huge hit, both in the UK and globally, because of the pandemic, I have every confidence that it will bounce back with the right support. We should use the current crisis to ensure that the sector is able to accelerate reform to a cleaner future. That is why it is vital that the Government continue to support the sector to ensure that it is able to lead our national recovery. The regional support for airports through the offsetting of business rates is welcome, but it would be remiss of me not to make the case for further sector support for airlines, those in the supply chain and airports at this incredibly challenging time.

We have a world-leading aviation sector of which we should be proud. We have the third-largest aviation network in the world and the second-largest aerospace manufacturing sector, supporting 1 million jobs and with a turnover in excess of £60 billion before the pandemic. Yet despite all the developments and growth in aviation over decades, the UK's airspace has largely remained unchanged for 60 years. Review and change is long overdue, and the measures in the Bill are welcome and essential.

It is a huge credit to the UK aviation sector that it has maintained the growth it has, despite us lagging behind the rest of the world in airspace management. As aircraft and aviation technologies have advanced in the past 60 years, our airspace management has not kept pace. That has led at times to inefficient use of airspace, which has often contributed to higher pollution and noise.

I have nothing but admiration for those at NATS who manage our airspace in what has been one of the most complex airborne environments in the world, underpinned by an overly bureaucratic system of outdated legislation and complex guidance. The strains on our airspace have become most apparent in recent years. Prior to covid, flight delays in minutes per year had been increasing consistently in the five years leading up to 2020. That coincided with a year-on-year rise in the number of flights in the UK. Most alarmingly, estimates by the DFT suggest that, without the modernising of air traffic, delays could rise by 72 times by 2030, with more than one flight in every three from UK airports expected to depart more than half an hour late. Those estimates were admittedly put together prior to the pandemic, but when we do return to the pre-2019 level of flights in 2023 or 2024 as expected, we are unlikely to see a change in the trend of delayed flights without modernisation of our airspace.

The implementation of the reforms, innovations and technological solutions set out in the Bill are essential for our future prosperity. As we continue to deliver modern airports and state-of-the-art fuel-efficient and environmentally friendly aircraft, it would be a missed opportunity for us not also to modernise our airspace in the process. I am pleased that that is exactly what the Bill will bring about. I welcome the Bill also because it is a great example of cross-party parliamentarians from both Houses of Parliament working together with Government Departments and relevant civil authorities on issues of common concern that can be addressed only by bringing all stakeholders on board.

The all-party parliamentary group on general aviation, which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport started and chaired for many years, has long looked into the issue of airspace change. In summer 2019, the APPG's dedicated working group on airspace published its report of the inquiry led by the noble Lord Kirkhope on the adequacy of our airspace, especially at the lower—arguably more dangerous—end of below 7,000 feet. One important recommendation from the inquiry to the DFT and CAA was the introduction of a ratchet-down process for removing underused volumes of controlled airspace. It also suggested that the CAA should make a radical shift in its internal processes for airspace change to allow for greater flexibility in future airspace design. I am pleased to see both recommendations incorporated in the Bill and thank Ministers and officials for their proactive and positive engagement with members of the APPG in the consultation process.

The Bill will achieve this modernisation in three main parts. It will allow for an airport or other person involved in airspace change to be compelled to progress or co-operate with an airspace change proposal in line with the overall modernisation strategy. The second part of the Bill will bring in much needed updates to our airspace licensing regime in accordance with best practice. Part 3 relates to unmanned aircraft such as drones, which are no doubt a critical part of the future of aviation; their development is important for our economy for the future.

General aviation is often overlooked in the aviation policies of successive Governments, but general aviation matters. GA contributes over £1 billion to the UK economy, and supports hundreds of thousands of well-paid jobs across all regions of the UK. GA is also important as a gateway to the UK's world-beating commercial aviation sector. General aviation activities such as gliding provide accessible grassroots, which often help to inspire young people into science, technology, maths and engineering subjects. GA platforms are also the best early testbeds for new technologies, such as electric propulsion. Without free airspace to test in, the UK will be at a competitive disadvantage for attracting high-tech aviation companies just as we are seeing the dawn of the new era of sustainable aviation.

General aviation is often overlooked when it comes to airspace management, and often finds itself restricted, or excluded from too much airspace. The Bill grants the Government—and, by extension, the CAA—the power to request that an air navigation service provider change its airspace in a certain way. This will be the first time that our regulator has ever been given this power, which is commonly found in other countries. The Bill will complement the CAA's airspace modernisation strategy, which aims to rationalise the UK's airspace system, bringing greater efficiency to air transport. Indeed, alongside the strategy is a commitment to look at reclassifying areas of low airspace that are problematic for general aviation. To improve use of lower airspace, it may be necessary to compel an airport to reduce its area of controlled airspace. This would not be achieved without the powers contained in the Bill.

Finally, I turn to the much discussed Government amendment on the temporary alleviation of the 80:20 usage rule, which requires airlines to use their allocated airport slots at least 80% of the time to retain entitlement to the same slots in the next equivalent scheduling period. I fully understand the rationale behind this. We do not want to see airlines continuing to fly empty or near-empty aircrafts at huge financial and environmental costs for the sake of keeping their slots. When administered well, the reprieve from this rule can form an essential part of the wider package of support for the industry. However, I urge Ministers to ensure that it does not pose any obstacle to maintaining critical connections between regional and national airports, and thus hinder the Government's agenda to drive regional growth. I seek the Minister's assurance that we will not miss this opportunity to ensure that slot allocation is not a barrier to growth, and that we grow our essential connectivity to our major airports for regional airports.

The Bill will bring much needed changes to modernise our airspace and improve efficiency of air traffic management. It will help to deliver quicker, quieter and cleaner journeys, which will help to reduce carbon

emissions while increasing capacity where needed, increasing the resilience of our airspace and allowing greater access for general aviation. The Bill represents yet another positive step for the future of British aviation. I am pleased to support the Bill and urge colleagues across the House to do so.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Audio link—Sarah Olney.

5.23 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD) [V]: I am sorry that you cannot see me, Mr Deputy Speaker. Thank you for updating the House with the very sad news about Captain Sir Tom Moore's death. I extend the Liberal Democrats' condolences to the family at this very sad news. His positive and energetic response to the lockdown last summer was an inspiration to many people at a time when we really needed it, and a great sadness at the news of his death will extend far beyond his family and friends.

I am speaking on behalf of the Liberal Democrats on this important piece of legislation. It is fantastic that it is finally making its way through the Houses of Parliament. It is a really important and long overdue airspace modernisation Bill, and I welcome its Second Reading today. The Liberal Democrats will be supporting all parts of the Bill. Obviously, anything at all to do with airspace modernisation will be closely monitored in Richmond Park, especially in the light of changes to the aviation industry resulting from covid-19. We have seen an enormous drop in aviation activity; in terms of the overall noise that my residents are experiencing, that is certainly something that we welcome.

We very much welcome the Government taking powers to implement airspace change in part 1 of the Bill, because we hope that by taking control of such changes, they will enable residents who live under flightpaths or near airports to be listened to. Residents should have the opportunity to respond to consultations, and to have the Government respond to their views when changes are proposed. This should not be driven just by the airline industry, and I believe we can get a better balance so that all different and competing interests are reflected in this airspace change which, as other hon. Members have said, is long overdue.

Hon. Members have been speaking about aircraft noise, and about developments such as noise-saving or quieter aircraft. I hope we will be able to bank any improvements in aircraft noise, as that will improve the quality of life for residents everywhere, and certainly for those who live under flight paths and near airports. I hope that can be about a general improvement in quality of life, rather than the proposal, which I have seen, for such improvements just to mean that we have more aircraft, so that we would maintain current levels of noise, but with more, quieter, aircraft. I want to push back against that, and encourage the Minister to think about a gradual alleviation of the burden of noise on residents everywhere.

We welcome the temporary provisions in part 2 of the Bill on slot allocation, which will provide certainty for an industry that has had the most catastrophic year and is looking very much to the future. Airlines will want to know that their slots are protected, and the change in legislation makes a great deal of sense. As others have

[Sarah Olney]

highlighted, it is absurd that airlines should feel forced to provide empty or half-empty services just to maintain slots. That is not only a waste of money—a precious cost that the industry can ill afford at this time—but the impact on carbon emissions does not need spelling out. We are all committed to reducing unnecessary carbon emissions, and we need the Bill to stop those unnecessary flights. The Bill will introduce welcome flexibility to slot allocation as we go forward and find our way out of the covid pandemic, and particularly when we start to rebuild the aviation industry after the lockdown. That will enable the industry to respond better to changes in demand, with a corresponding saving in costs and carbon emissions.

I welcome the legislation on drones, which is long overdue. Drones have been a feature of UK life for a considerable time, and until now much of the regulation on their use has been contained in CAA regulations. The use of drones should be governed by criminal law, and as we saw with the Gatwick shutdown at Christmas 2018, proper legislation is long overdue. Drones will have a transformative impact on British life over the next 10 to 15 years, and they have clear and proven benefits to our military, police and emergency services. There are emerging applications for drones in our business and creative sectors. Those advantages have also been exploited by criminals and terrorists, and it is right to introduce powers to clamp down on illegal usage and make the fullest positive use of the new technology. Part of that involves building trust among the British public regarding the use of drones and those who use them, so that they know that drones are properly regulated and licensed and that usage is monitored. That will give us the opportunity fully to exploit their potential.

I am concerned that the Bill does not address the pressing issue of privacy and the threat to it that drones represent. Addressing that properly will encourage the British public in their confidence about drone use. I hope the Government will continue to monitor the development of drone use, and be prepared to update legislation accordingly, as and when new uses appear—including potentially negative uses—so that we maintain the British public's trust in that emerging and exciting new technology.

5.30 pm

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con) [V]: It is a pleasure to take part in this debate and to follow the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney). This is a good Bill, and I commend the Minister and his team for its drafting and for bringing it forward at this time. It is a very relevant Bill for Bedfordshire, because, as my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) said, many people in Bedfordshire work at London Luton airport and in its associated supply chain. Owing to protocol, as a Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries) is not contributing in this debate, but I am sure that she would want to commend to the House the work of Cranfield University. I believe it is the only university with its own airport, and it plays a leading role in our understanding of aircraft, airport and airspace management.

This is also a timely Bill, because although, as the Minister said, most have paused their consultation work on airspace changes, there is an ongoing consultation

on airspace at Luton airport, in combination with Stansted. I wish to draw attention to certain features of that as they relate to this Bill. The Bill rightly recognises that in the allocation and sharing of the limited resource of airspace above the United Kingdom there is a considerable public interest. The Bill focuses, correctly, on making sure that in that process overall public interest is achieved to the best extent as quickly and efficiently as possible. In doing so, it brings to the Civil Aviation Authority and to the Department certain additional ways of compelling airports to make changes that will achieve a speedier resolution of airspace allocations, which will in turn achieve some of our other goals.

One of the most important of those goals is achieving air quality standards and making sure that our aviation industry is sustainable as we seek to achieve our climate change goals. Although the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) was right to say that this Bill is just a part of that and that there is a large whole that we need to consider, I hope he would recognise that the Government are right to bring forward this part of the puzzle; it is a crucial part of our achieving that overall ambition.

The third area of public interest is in the issue of externalities. Although many people work in and use airports, a great number of people are also affected by airports and their use. Airports, by their very nature, can create noise pollution, and they create air pollution and congestion. Those points come to the fore when consultations about airspace changes take place, as is the case currently with the Luton and Stansted airspace changes consultation.

That process is under way and the Minister's comments in this debate may therefore be curtailed, but I point out to him that many of my constituents feel that their ability as members of the public to participate in that consultation has been curtailed, not just because of covid restrictions, but by the very framework by which the public can voice their opinions about those changes. In trying to move pieces around and achieve an overall picture that works for the country as a whole, our national airspace control is perhaps intrinsically limited in what it can offer as suggestions to the public for their consultation. In the London Luton airport consultation, the public in Bedfordshire have been left with a limited choice of options to be consulted on. They therefore feel that their democratic voice is not being heard. What consideration has the Minister given to ensuring that, as we achieve greater speed in the process, the public truly have a voice in the resolution of deciding on flightpaths?

That takes us on to the sharing of benefits. We are having a consultation in Bedfordshire because Luton airport wishes to expand, which will be very much to the financial benefit of the operator of Luton airport and also of the landlords—that is, one of the local authorities in Bedfordshire, Luton Borough Council. Both the airport operator and Luton Borough Council should anticipate considerable increases in their revenues from that expansion, yet it is the residents of Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Hertfordshire who will incur the costs of those externalities, whether that is in air quality, noise pollution or their ability to get around and about because of road congestion. That is not addressed in the Bill and, again, I would be interested in the Minister's view of whether it is appropriate, as part of the allocation

of airspace, to start to see in this Bill consideration of how those affected by the changes can receive compensation from those who benefit from them.

The parts of the Bill that refer to drones are welcome additional legislation. This is a good move for the Government, providing some order in how the criminal uses of drones can be controlled. I was reassured in my conversations with the Minister that the additional burdens and responsibilities on police forces should not be considerable. This is a particular issue in Bedfordshire, again, where police resources are spread so thinly. As other Members have said, it is particularly around airports that the misuse of drones becomes of such great concern to the public. I would be grateful if the Minister could comment further about his expectations of the burden on police time, in order to give additional reassurance to the police.

While I am on the issue of the police, I was interested in the comments made by the hon. Member for Richmond Park about the police use of drones. That is not in the Bill, but I would point out to the Minister that there is considerable advantage in the police being able to use drones in everyday policing. As a Member of Parliament for a largely rural constituency, I know that drones offer an opportunity for response times that other modes of transportation would be unable to accomplish. As part of this overall review of airspace, what consultations has the Minister been having with the Home Office to ensure that any future required use of drones by the police will be adequately covered by the regulations that we are looking at today?

I close by joining colleagues in paying tribute to Captain Sir Tom Moore, a national hero and an adopted son of Bedfordshire, with these words, which he used to encourage us last April, when we were perhaps at the darkest of times. He said:

“To all those...finding it difficult...the sun will shine on you again, and the clouds will go away”.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): That is a very good tribute to Captain Sir Tom Moore, and one in which I think we would all happily participate.

5.39 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD) [V]: On that note, Madam Deputy Speaker, may I also briefly mention my own sadness at hearing of the death of Captain Sir Tom Moore? I am sure that all our thoughts are with his family, who must be unspeakably proud of the enormous contribution that he has made through his fundraising to our national morale and to the NHS in this most difficult of times.

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller) in this important and much-delayed debate. Covid-19 has cast light on a number of issues perhaps forgotten and deserving of more attention, and this is one that has been neglected as a result of the pandemic. Airspace has been part of my political career from the moment I was elected—indeed, before then—in 2017. The proposed new flight paths for Edinburgh airport, which are part of the new airspace management proposals, were already controversial. One of the first issues I had to address immediately after my election that year were the published proposals and the consultation with the Civil Aviation Authority. Since then, there has been little, if any, progress, and even before

covid-19 the process had stalled. The uncertainty and delay around this Bill has created an unfair situation not just for the industry and the airports but for the communities around them. The noise pollution and air pollution created by flightpaths needs to be addressed, and communities must have a say in that.

The last time that management of our astonishingly complex airspace was seriously addressed was, as we have heard, in the 1950s. Decades and decades have passed with nothing close to substantial update or alteration. If that were in any other area—say, our roads or our railways—we would be shocked. We have seen so many advances and it is unimaginable that there has not been modernisation.

As we seek to recover from covid-19, we need this Bill to give people the confidence that we have done, and are doing, all we can to deliver more efficient and greener journeys for everyone. As part of that, we also need to tackle the illegal use of drones and prioritise people’s safety above all else, balancing the rights and liberties of those who use them and the many advantages that we have heard that they can bring. In 2017 alone, there were more than 50 reported near misses. Imagine the devastation and the loss of life that could have been caused if one of those unmanned aircraft collided with, perhaps, a wide-bodied jet at an airport close to a highly populated area. We need geofencing software to make it impossible for these drones to encroach on commercial and military airspace. We need to make sure that all the new powers of enforcement are proportionate and acknowledge that the majority of users are law-abiding. We also need to acknowledge, as previous speakers have mentioned, the advantages that could come from proper and effective use of these unmanned aircraft.

We need to see, as part of this process, the safeguarding of slots. We have heard mention of the 80:20 rule. So many of these slots have been underused over the past year and could have been lost. We must suspend such automatic suspension. The impact in Scotland of failure to maintain those slots could be crucial to our connectivity, not just with the continent and with London but within Scotland itself, between our mainland airports and the islands. For my own airport in Edinburgh, the routes to London are a vital business connection for the economy not just of Edinburgh but of all of Scotland. Over the recent period, we have seen a steep decline in the number of flights—practically to zero at some points. If those slots were to be lost, our economic recovery would be so much more difficult.

All these issues have to be looked at in conjunction with the other major threat that we face: the threat to our climate. We must acknowledge that the aviation industry and its air traffic is crucial to tackling that. In achieving our net zero targets, fossil fuels, emissions and noise pollution must all be addressed.

This Bill has taken too long and we need to make sure that it progresses now. More delays would mean delays to economic progress, air safety and climate action, and all of that would be unacceptable.

5.44 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): May I first, on behalf of the Democratic Unionist party, offer my sincere condolences to Captain Tom’s daughters and family at a very sad time? Every one of us was inspired by his words when we were all perhaps looking inward and thinking

[*Jim Shannon*]

negative thoughts. He inspired us at a time that we really needed it. There was not a morning when we heard him speaking on the television that we did not feel a wee bit better. The hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller) spoke about some of his words. There is one wee sentence that I remember, and always will—I have quoted it many times in this House and to my friends and people I speak to. He always said that “tomorrow will be a better day”.

The day that he inspired us all as a nation was a better day for us, and it is something that we will never forget.

Thank you for allowing me to speak briefly on this Bill, Madam Deputy Speaker. The legislation has been a long time coming. We all recall the shutting down of Gatwick airport and the disruption caused a number of years ago by drones. At that stage, it was clear that while there are many wonderful uses for unmanned aircraft, there are also nefarious ones, and these must be addressed in legislation. That is why I welcome this legislation: it addresses those issues, and I thank the Minister and Government in advance for that. Let us thank them when they do things right, and today they have it right.

I welcome the news of the development of drone fighters through the Ministry of Defence at the former Bombardier plant in Northern Ireland by Spirit AeroSystems Holdings. This £30 million design contract is a three-year deal to build a prototype model, which will help to support 100 jobs at the Belfast aero-structures factory by developing so-called “loyal wingman” drones by the end of the decade to serve alongside the Eurofighter Typhoon and Lockheed Martin F-35 warplanes. The Royal Air Force’s first unmanned craft would be armed with missiles and carry surveillance and electronic warfare technology.

I have discussed this with the Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), and we have worked in conjunction with the Minister to try to ensure that these are the sort of contracts that come. I do not know for definite, but I am sure that the Minister had a role to play in that, and I thank him in advance. We really do appreciate it. At a time when we hear all the negativity about the high street, it is good to know that we have manufacturing jobs in place in Belfast, and that will spin off for my constituents in Strangford as well.

The Bill is necessary and welcome. I understand that the Police Service of Northern Ireland has used drones more than 370 times since June 2013. Figures obtained by BBC News NI showed that the PSNI used drones in wildlife rescues, missing person hunts and VIP visits. They have very much been a necessary tool in search and rescue missions, as well as being used in other areas. The benefits of drones for security and as a tool to help the security forces is very clear, but there must still be regulation. I therefore welcome the fact that the Bill provides protection on all sides for the expanding use of drones. Some people phoned me and asked, “Where can we use drones?”, so this needs to be regulated and, clearly, we have seen many examples where they have not been used in the correct place.

There are also concerns about the use of drones to smuggle contraband into prisons—this is one of my major concerns. I have asked these questions of Justice

Ministers and they always come back with a positive answer. However, these things are happening and the Government have introduced measures to try to stop it.

I read a very interesting report by a prison chief, who openly stated that while the threat to prison security from drones, used to drop consignments into establishments, has been known for several years, it is now the case that “technology has evolved rapidly to allow the devices to be directed to an”

individual’s

“cell window using GPS transmitters the size of a little finger.”

Technology has moved on and that is why this legislation is so important. The article by Cahal Milmo for inews.co.uk went on to say that

“while the prison service had developed technology capable of detecting and blocking signals used by drones and encrypted telephones smuggled into prison, the prohibitive cost of the equipment and the training to operate it meant it could only be used at a small number of jails.”

The Minister is not responsible for jails and for justice, but if there are examples of drones being used to bring contraband and illegal substances into prisons, such equipment should be made available to every prison. In Northern Ireland, drones have been used on multiple occasions to drop goods from cigarettes to drugs, and even family photographs, so it is clear that the introduction of new rules in 2019, while welcome, was insufficient. That is why we need the Bill.

I recently contacted my local council to see how I could help someone who was suffering owing to antisocial behaviour, which, by the way, was noise caused by the misuse of a drone in close proximity to his house, as well as a number of other houses in the area. It is clear that our local authorities and police force need more to work with. It is my hope that the Bill will deliver exactly that, and I think it will.

Clauses 13 to 18, together with schedules 8 to 11, will expand the regulatory framework to address misuse of unmanned aircraft. The Bill will provide powers to police the misuse of unmanned aircraft, including grounding unmanned aircraft, stopping and searching people and vehicles, obtaining a warrant to search property, and fixed penalties for certain offences relating to unmanned aircraft.

I look upon the Minister not just as a Minister but as a personal friend, and his energy and interest in the subject are expressed in the way he does his job. I say a big thank you to him for that. I also thank the Government for what they do and for introducing a Bill that encapsulates the strength of the House and brings us together. You know me, Madam Deputy Speaker: I often say that we are better together and better when we work together to make things happen. Today is an example of that.

The proposals are sensible and I support the Government in their aim to enable those using drones for the right reasons to do so legally by licence. Those who use drones for other purposes should understand that there are severe penalties for doing so. I welcome the Bill and its aims.

5.52 pm

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con) [V]: It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). Given his weekly commute, he is well placed to comment on air travel. As always, he spoke with great authority.

The Bill is welcome, and I congratulate the Minister and his predecessor on the work they have done in the other place and on bringing the Bill to the House relatively unchanged and with cross-party support. This is a good Bill and I support it.

My constituency sits mid-way between Manchester and Liverpool John Lennon airports, so in the skies above the town we see flights coming from all directions just after take-off or as they come in to land. We are well aware of the need to ensure that there is co-ordination between airport operators when they plan routes. I am also very aware that around 4,000 of my constituents are employed in this sector. This is an important part of the local economy.

I agree with the Minister that there is a need to modernise UK airspace, and I welcome the plan to make journeys quicker, quieter and cleaner. Most important, though, is retaining the essential elements of safety in our skies, which are some of the busiest and most complicated in the world. It is therefore critical that we prepare for the next 50 years. The UK aviation sector is a global leader and an engine for growth, and we need it to be fit for purpose to enable levelling up in our UK regions.

As we know, owing to covid-19, there is only limited air traffic, with most airports running at between 1% and 3% of normal passenger levels. We also know that air travel will return, and we need to ensure that our airspace—our infrastructure; highways in the sky—is fit for purpose in a post-pandemic world.

As someone who lives under the flight path for aircraft leaving Manchester airport, I am particularly pleased to hear that this programme will also have an impact on noise. By simplifying UK airspace, we are making it more efficient. It will deliver more precise and more direct routes, preventing rising delays and reducing congestion. These upgrades to our regulatory infrastructure will be essential in reducing the environmental impact of UK flights by reducing miles flown and carbon dioxide levels, alongside industry efforts to develop more fuel-efficient engines and cleaner, sustainable fuels.

Advances in aircraft and air traffic control capabilities risk other countries pressing ahead with modernising their systems, while we risk lagging behind if we do not do the same and support the Bill. Airspace modernisation, by facilitating emissions savings, is therefore a key component of the UK's legally binding commitment to reach net zero carbon emissions by 2050, while also benefiting all users of airspace, including general aviation flyers, and tackling the misuse of new types of unmanned aircraft, such as drones, which I will talk about later.

One of the main challenges that might impede the implementation of the Bill and future planning will be the financial state of the industry. I am particularly pleased to welcome the £8 million of UK Government support grant funding for airports such as Manchester and Liverpool announced last week. Airports have seen their revenues disappear almost completely for nearly 12 months now. We cannot ignore this issue. I urge the Minister to continue dialogue with airport operators. It would be remiss of me not to mention the ongoing support that I know the sector will continue to need in the coming months, before it can soar again.

Part 2 of the Bill will modernise regulatory provision relating to air traffic services provided by National Air Traffic Services and regulated by the Civil Aviation

Authority, ensuring that the framework remains fit for purpose and continues to build on the UK's excellent safety record. The Bill will also enable us to continue to provide alleviation from the requirements to use slots at co-ordinated airports—the 80:20 rule that so many of my colleagues have talked about—for a further time, into 2024. During a pandemic, when flight demand has significantly decreased, we are no longer compelling airlines to run empty flights, costing money and causing pollution just to keep their slots.

Finally, part 3 of the Bill provides new, additional police powers to tackle the unlawful use of unmanned aircraft. It has been developed in conjunction with the Home Office and police forces.

Unmanned aircraft are increasingly being used across the industry and have huge potential for good. Drones are being put to good use by the emergency services, for example, and more broadly can help to improve efficiency in industries such as construction. However, it is crucial that a careful balance is struck in our approach to this technology, to ensure that the successful uptake of drones is matched by strong safeguards to provide public safety, privacy and security.

There is a real threat to aviation. Just before Christmas, the UK Air Safety Board reported on what was described as the closest ever near miss in the UK, when an EasyJet Airbus flying at 8,000 feet, having just taken off over the Cheshire countryside, came within feet of a 10 kg drone. The consequences of the collision would have been disastrous for passengers, crew and those on the ground. We saw the impact at Gatwick when new technology was used to ground flights. I welcome the additional stop-and-search powers for those suspected of being involved with offences involving unmanned aircrafts.

I spoke recently to the governor of Thorn Cross Prison at Appleton Thorn and I am aware of the challenges that the Prison Service faces from the use of drones illegally delivering contraband to convicted criminals. Governors are having to take measures to protect the prison estate, so the additional steps in the Bill are very welcome indeed.

Having not undergone any significant modernisation since the 1950s, there is no doubt that our airspace is in need of change to meet the increasing demands that will continue when the sector returns to full force. The technological advances in unmanned aircraft also present significant challenges. I will be supporting the Bill today.

I offer my condolences to the family and friends of Captain Sir Tom Moore. He gave us optimism at a time when the country faced a terrible crisis. I think we can all agree that he is the definition of a modern hero.

5.59 pm

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con) [V]: May I start by associating myself with what my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter) said about Captain Sir Tom Moore? Last year, he really did inspire the nation with his fundraising, but of course he also helped to save the nation over 80 years before. It is a very sad day, and my condolences go to his family. He has really shown us the best of British in what he did last year in responding to coronavirus.

I turn to the subject of today's debate. After all the Brexit and covid-related legislation that we have been through so far, a Bill such as this is quite refreshing for a new MP. It is a more traditional piece of legislation: an

[Aaron Bell]

important update that reflects changes in the world and aims to future-proof—as best we can—for the world we are going to get back into once we get past the pandemic. I congratulate the Minister and welcome him to his place, and also congratulate Baroness Vere on all the work she did on the Bill in the Lords. This is a case of proportionate regulation, which is what we always seek to do as a Government and as a Conservative party. We recognise the need for regulation. It needs to be proportionate and to not put undue burdens on businesses, but we need to make sure that things work, and work for the good of the country.

I turn briefly to the first of the Bill's three parts, on airspace management. It is to be hoped that airports can co-operate without the requirement for the Secretary of State to compel them; perhaps this Bill will make the voluntary process a little more voluntary, if you understand what I mean, Madam Deputy Speaker. However, we have an airspace modernisation strategy and, within that, some airports may need to release underused controlled airspace, for example. As many of my colleagues have said, including my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South, we have a very complex airspace—one of the most complicated in the world. Of course, it is very empty at the moment for the reasons we have discussed, but anything we can do to modernise that and make things work better is obviously something we should be encouraging as a Government. We need quicker, quieter, cleaner journeys. Unnecessary fuel burning on approach is not only ridiculous from a green perspective, but leads to a great deal of noise and inconvenience for individuals.

In itself, that is the source of delays. As we have heard from a number of colleagues, one in three flights might be significantly delayed by 2030 if we do not pass this legislation today. Of course, that also creates more capacity, and although none of us can know exactly what the world is going to look like, I think having that capacity is a good thing: whether we use it or not, it allows us to be more efficient in the way we route our flights and go on holiday, as well as in our world trade, as the Minister said. We are just about to accede to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, one hopes—we are starting the proceedings for that—and we will need our aviation industry to be part of our trade with the rest of the world as well.

The second part is mostly tidying up and modernising, but what it needs to do, and what it does, is reflect our safety record and ensure that we maintain that record. I think that new clause 12, which the Government introduced while the Bill was in the Lords—this is the covid-related aspect of today's legislation, I suppose—is a very sensible amendment that reflects the situation we are in at present. Personally, I would favour a much more market-based approach to slots in future. However, with the industry on its knees at the moment, now is clearly not the right time for that and in any event it would require global co-operation. The idea that things should be grandfathered down forever and ever does not strike me as a modern way to do things, but I understand that is how we have to operate at the moment, and the proposals in new clause 12 are a sensible suspension of that process while we work through covid.

Part 3 deals with unarmed aircraft or drones. We have heard from many people, including the Minister, that drones are having a huge effect on lots of important areas. They can be a real boon to many industries, including search and rescue and medical supplies, and are also a very engaging hobby, as I have seen for myself when walking up in the Staffordshire moorlands.

I have no desire—nor, I am sure, do the Government—to demonise responsible owners of drones who are having fun with them, getting out and enjoying the great outdoors. However, we need measures to guard against malicious use, and we also need sensitive sites to be able to defend themselves. That includes airports, as we saw at Gatwick, and some of our most sensitive sites, such as nuclear sites; it also includes prisons, as many have said. The idea that drones can get around prisons, or get over and into prisons, is one that nobody should tolerate, and I know the police are very keen for us to get this legislation passed so that we can cut down on what is going on there. We also need a solution so that a single sighting of a drone does not close an airport, and the measures in the Bill mean that we will not see repeats of what happened at Gatwick.

I will conclude, because I can see that my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Dean Russell) is desperate to stand up and make his speech; I can see him grinning. This is a solid piece of legislation. I am glad that it has cross-party support. It has already been tried and tested in the Lords, with amendments incorporated into it. This is how the House should proceed with measures such as this, which are all about ensuring that we are battle-ready for both the present and future in important industries such as aviation that have such an important part to play in our future. I commend the Minister for his opening speech and for all his work on the Bill.

6.5 pm

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell) for his excellent speech. First, I would like to join others in paying tribute to Captain Tom. I felt last year that he was almost a grandfather to the nation. We have definitely lost a member of our British family in the last few hours, and I send my condolences to his family. He was truly one of the best of us.

I will speak primarily to parts 1 and 3. I thank the Ministers and all involved with the Bill, which does something quite transformative for not just the industry but the country. The last major change to legislation in this area happened in the 1950s. It is quite incredible to think that the rules and legislation on this industry have not changed in that time, given that the industry has shaped not just how we live but how we look at the world, how we understand other cultures and how we understand one another, and has made the world a little bit smaller as technology has advanced.

For many years as a student, I worked at an airport. I did everything from cleaning toilets to patrolling car parks—not that I was particularly threatening when walking around in my yellow jacket. What I saw back then was the incredible passion of those who work in the airline industry—everyone from those who made sure that the planes were safe to fly to those who were flying them. It is right for Government to ensure that, as we look to the next 20, 30, 40 and 50 years, we have an ambitious plan that puts security, safety and the traveller

at the heart of it. Part 1, which relates to the collaborative approach and the ways in which airlines can work together, does that. It is so important to ensure that passengers are put at the heart of this, and the Bill does that very well.

I mentioned that the last major change was made in the 1950s. That reminds me, as a science fiction fan, of the prediction by Arthur C. Clarke in 1945 of the idea of satellites. Back then, that was truly science fiction. We did not imagine that satellites would exist in the way they do today, and they have transformed our lives in so many ways. With this Bill, and in particular part 3, we are seeing what was science fiction being transformed into science fact.

The role of drones in society over just a few years has been transformative. Organisations such as Amazon use them to deliver parcels. There are medical opportunities—for example, to deliver vaccines, especially in far-flung countries where it is perhaps easier to travel long distances by air, via unmanned vehicles, than it would be in the UK.

With every good move in technology and in the shift from fiction to fact, we have to take into account the impact on real lives. Given the impact that unmanned vehicles could have on society, it is right that the Bill gives the Home Office and the police powers to ensure that these vehicles are used in the right way and do not create more danger and risk to those around us. We have heard excellent speeches about drones being used to drop illicit substances and items into prisons, and we have heard about the dangers of drones at airports, potentially risking lives by flying too close or even flying into manned vehicles.

When we look forward, we have got to look at this issue in the round, and the Bill really does that. It enables additional police powers and creates the ability to have an industry around drones that will put up to £42 billion into the economy by 2030. It is creating a lot of opportunity, but in a safe way.

When people look back in 50 or 60 years' time to the legislation being put in place now, I believe they will look at this Bill and see how balanced it was, how forward-thinking it was and how it enabled us to ensure that legislation and Bills were in place to protect society, while not binding the hands of those who want to develop new opportunities to create technology that can transform the society we live in.

6.10 pm

Mike Kane: Before summing up the debate, I would like once again to offer Her Majesty's official Opposition's condolences to the family and friends of Sir Tom Moore. While we hurt today, he reminded us that tomorrow will be a better day.

It has been a terrific debate—really well informed and the House at its best. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, it is about co-operation and trying to get our aviation sector to a better place in a difficult time. I thank the Members who have contributed today. The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) said that our airways are part of our critical national infrastructure, and that is how we should treat them. Let us make sure that we improve them. If there is a hold-up at Treasury, as he says, let us get past that and do this for the good of the industry and the country.

As the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) said, while drones can be a force for good in the world, they can be a force for evil, with malicious use by the drug barons and others, and that is why we need to have better police powers, which are intended to be in this Bill.

The right hon. Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne) said it is crucial we find a way to redress the environmental impact of aviation. Nobody would be against that and that is what we all seek to do. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) has grappled with the issues of having one of the world's major airports in his constituency. The approach is piecemeal to a certain extent, and we do need a comprehensive strategy, and let us hope we get there in the near future.

The hon. Member for Sedgefield (Paul Howell) has expertise and is a pilot himself. He spoke of a single authority to broker co-operation. That is what the Bill hopes to achieve. Airspace modernisation will be a benefit for small craft such as the one he flies; as it happens, I am sure the Secretary of State will also be pleased by that. He also rightly pointed out the effect of the pandemic on regional airports. While we welcome the business rates support, we know that for some airports that hardly touched the sides, and I will come back to that point in a second.

The hon. Member for South Antrim (Paul Girvan) spoke about quicker, quieter, cleaner journeys, and that is what is required. The hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), whom I praise for his work as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on general aviation, said that the best days lie ahead for aviation, and I believe that. With electric flights, hydrogen flights and clean fuel flights, there is the opportunity to modernise. Labour has called for a further sector-specific deal, and he echoed that by saying that further support is required and not only in aviation. As he mentioned, we can inspire our young people into STEM subjects and the industry.

The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) rightly pointed out that we enable residents to have a say through consultation, and that is important. That point was echoed by the hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller). It is unimaginable that the airspace above the constituency of the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) has not been modernised since the 1950s. Since then, Yuri Gagarin went into space and Neil Armstrong landed on the moon. It is time for this legislation.

As ever, my good friend the hon. Member for Strangford spoke about the immense benefits that drone technology will bring to the Northern Ireland economy. The Minister and I cover maritime as well, and there is just the search and rescue capability we have not even thought of that can be inspired by drone technology and, again, we hope to see that come on stream.

The hon. Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter), whose airport lies between Manchester's in my constituency and John Lennon airport, is right. Our skies are packed in good times, and we need better co-ordination. He said it: we need to set our eyes on the horizon and to be looking 50 years ahead. The hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell) said we need to future-proof our airspace for the world we want to see again. Finally, the hon. Member for Watford (Dean Russell), who has just spoken about his real lived experience of working in

[Mike Kane]

an airport—there is nothing quite like it—said that security, safety and the passenger experience have to be at the heart of what we do. I hope that we can explore some of those themes further in the Bill Committee.

6.15 pm

Robert Courts: With the leave of the House, I would like to sum up the debate for the Government. May I also, at the outset, associate myself and Her Majesty's Government with the comments from all hon. Members about the very sad passing of Captain Sir Tom Moore? He was perhaps the perfect exemplar of that golden generation. He was a gentleman, an inspiration, a light in the covid darkness and a cheerful ray of hope to all of the country, and of course, above all, to his family, to whom we send our condolences. He will be terribly missed not only by them, but by the whole nation.

I thank hon. Members for all the contributions to the debate we have heard today. I entirely associate myself with the comments the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) has just made: this has been an exceptionally well-informed, constructive and interesting debate. I will turn to as many of the points as I can today without, I hope, droning on too long, but if there are any points that I do not manage to fly through in time or any points that I do not sufficiently land, I will return to hon. Members in writing. [Laughter.] I will stop there, I promise.

I turn first to the funding for airspace change, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) and, indeed, the hon. Members for Wythenshawe and Sale East and for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands). The Government recognise entirely the challenging times the sector is facing due to covid, but the Government are confident, as my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter) argued, that the sector will recover. While that may take some time, it does not diminish the historic importance and the need for our airspace to be modernised.

The inefficiencies in our existing airspace design, as we have just heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Dean Russell), for example—he spoke about its not having changed since the 1950s—will continue to cause delays for passengers and unnecessary emissions for our environment. That has rightly been a focus of many hon. Members' speeches today, as we look forward to jet zero and a clean aviation sector in future, as have the problems with noise, which I will turn to in a moment.

It is important for me, however, to be clear up front that, while we recognise the severe impact that covid-19 is having on the aviation sector, the user pays policy principle is an important one: those who stand to benefit from airspace change should pay for the costs of such a change. In the light of the pandemic and its effects, at the moment most airports have paused their work on airspace change, but the modernisation remains critical to deliver that additional capacity and improve access to airspace for different users. I am particularly mindful of the comments that my hon. Friends the Members for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell) and for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) made about other types of air users, including, of course, General Aviation.

This modernisation also brings environmental benefits by reducing emissions, such as from the stacking talked about by the hon. Member for South Antrim (Paul Girvan). The Government have asked the Airspace Change Organising Group to revisit the master plan for airspace change in this light, and to ensure that the benefits of the programme are realised and that the investment already made is not lost.

Engagement with communities is key, and it has rightly been a major part of the debate today. It was referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire, the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North and my hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield (Paul Howell). As all those Members and others pointed out in today's debate, there is a need for airspace change to take account not just of the needs of industry, but of the effects on all affected stakeholders, including, of course, local communities. I would therefore like to reassure all Members that this is taken account of already through the Civil Aviation Authority's CAP 1616 airspace change process. This requires an airspace change proposal, whether part of the airspace modernisation programme or not, to pass a series of gateways, each of which the CAA must approve before it can progress to the next stage. That was introduced in 2018 and replaces the previous CAP 725 process. Some communities and hon. Members are becoming familiar with it.

It is separate from the planning process. CAP 1616 is more comprehensive than the process it succeeds. It provides communities and other interested parties, such as General Aviation, other airports, the Ministry of Defence and commercial aviation, with greater opportunities to comment on and influence airspace changes that could affect them. They will have more opportunities than they have had before. I hope that will be of assistance to all Members who have spoken on that today. The seven steps that an airspace sponsor must go through to facilitate a change in its airspace are laid out there.

If I could turn to some specific points that were raised by my hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire, I am of course aware of the London Luton airport airspace change proposal, which is currently out for consultation. I have received several representations from hon. Members about that. I met my hon. Friend in December to talk about and listen to his constituents' concerns. He is a powerful advocate for them and has made their views very clearly heard. As I know he will know, my Department is not involved in the consultation, and I cannot comment on its merits for regulatory and legal reasons. However, I urged his constituents to engage with the consultation and to ensure that Luton airport and NATS are fully alive to their concerns. Both Luton airport and NATS are obliged by the regulatory requirements of CAP 1616 to take such concerns into account as they finalise their proposals. This is a vital requirement of the process.

Another big feature of the debate today has been noise. It was mentioned in particular by the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney), but by other Members as well, and it is closely related to the community consultation point. Of course, the Government recognise that noise can have a significant impact on people's lives, which is why we introduced new metrics and appraisal guidance in October 2017 to assess noise impacts and their effects on health and quality of life. These will

ensure that future airspace changes consider noise impacts much further away from airports than they do at present and that new technology to ensure the more efficient use of our airspace will also produce noise reduction benefits.

I will just say a couple of words about performance-based navigations—PBNs—as I think the House will be interested. They basically use the same equipment as satellite navigation systems in our cars and will improve the accuracy of where aircraft fly, rather than in broad corridors as they do at present. That will provide opportunities to avoid, where possible, noise-sensitive areas including villages or towns. However, it is of course true that in some cases airspace modernisation may result in more concentrated air traffic over communities, but in those cases it may be possible to create multiple concentrated PBN routes that are designed to disperse aircraft to some degree and provide known respite to communities exposed to noise. The Government are also considering how to take forward noise proposals that were contained in the Aviation 2050 Green Paper published in 2015.

I would like to say a word or two following the excellent speech by my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne) on flights over areas of outstanding natural beauty. I recognise his huge expertise in both the natural world and aviation. He is justly respected for that. Flights over AONBs are not prohibited. The Government's air navigation guidance issued to the CAA in October 2017 states that aircraft operators should try to avoid flying over AONBs below 7,000 feet when it is practicable to do so. It is not possible to prohibit flights, as a number of UK airports are close to AONBs or national parks, so there are no powers to prevent flying at low altitude over AONBs for a number of reasons. The Government's air navigation guidance, as my right hon. Friend said, also requires new sponsors of airspace change proposals to take account of AONBs and national parks when designing their flightpaths.

My hon. Friends the Members for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller) and for South West Bedfordshire made a number of points about space and satellites. They rightly pointed out that the use of new technologies offers exciting opportunities for the UK and provides the opportunity to reduce emissions. For example, the ability to track aircraft over the high seas, which is currently impossible, will enable the more accurate prediction of arrival times. That is a key aim of the airspace modernisation strategy, for all the reasons related to tackling climate change and to secure the greener future that we all wish to see. I pay tribute to the comments that were made not only by my hon. Friends but by the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay and others. I assure the House that the Government continue to develop their space policy and we are working hard with our industrial partners to ensure that we maximise the benefits.

A number of Members, particularly my hon. Friends the Members for Sedgefield and for St Austell and Newquay, mentioned slots. While demand for aviation remains low, it is critical that we support the aviation sector so that it is able to restart services immediately when the pandemic allows. The provisions on slots in part 2 of the Bill will help to support the aviation sector

in the short term, while also reducing the need for environmentally damaging ghost flights and their financial impact.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield and the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North raised specific concerns. For each future scheduling period, instead of a full alleviation we will be able to look at the data and consider whether it is appropriate to set a lower percentage—for example, 50%—for the slot-usage rule. The data will also help us to consider whether and what conditions could be applied to any alleviation relating to the management of slots. I am keen to point out to all Members that this is a necessary, temporary support measure that will help the industry through the coming years.

The conditions to which I refer could enable available capacity to be backfilled with regional connections or additional freight capacity. I am particularly keen to point that out because the hon. Member for Edinburgh West and my hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield both referred to it. My hon. Friend also asked whether I would be happy to meet; of course I would, as I would be happy to meet any Members who would like to discuss that or any other issue in the Bill in detail over the weeks ahead.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay talked about the longer-term reform of slots allocation, the desirability of which I recognise. It will deliver a more dynamic marketplace that is competitive, supports growth and offers high levels of consumer choice. As the UK aviation market recovers from the impacts of covid-19, the Government will need to consider the impact on the industry and reflect that in any review of slots policy. Given the global nature of slots, this work will involve consultation with UK, European and international stakeholders, and the slot-allocation process will be considered in the round with any future review of aviation policy.

Let me return to unmanned aircraft. The hon. Member for South Antrim gave us a vivid and personal description of the difficulties that can be engendered by the malicious use of unmanned aircraft. The Bill will ensure that the police are able to tackle effectively the unlawful use of unmanned aircraft, building on some existing provisions in the Air Navigation Order 2016. It provides them with some new powers, such as the ability to require a person to land an unmanned aircraft, to which I have referred already.

As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) noted, the Bill gives police the powers to investigate criminal offences committed at prisons using drones, while also providing prisons with the powers to use counter-drone technology. The Government have been clear that we will do all we can to ensure that the UK firmly establishes itself as a world leader in unmanned-aircraft technology, but we are alive to the dangers posed by the careless or malicious use of the technology, as the hon. Members for Edinburgh West and for Strangford rightly urged us to be.

One or two Members have recognised the challenges involved for policing, which the Government of course recognise. The police need the tools that are required. We have taken a range of actions to ensure that the police are equipped to tackle the new threat that unmanned aircraft pose, and it is critical that the police have been involved in all stages of the Bill's development.

[Robert Courts]

Let me turn to some specific points raised by my hon. Friends the Members for North East Bedfordshire and for Warrington South, the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East and some others. The Department has worked closely with the Home Office, the police and the CAA to ensure that once the Bill becomes law its powers are realistic to implement. To aid the police in their implementation, we will provide officers with briefings, general guidance and guidance documents. On wider police resourcing, a new team in the National Police Chiefs' Council working to the national lead has been set up to co-ordinate and govern UK police counter-unmanned aircraft activity.

My hon. Friend the Member for Watford gave us a vivid description of the future and the benefits that drones can provide. The Government absolutely want to capture the benefits of unmanned aircraft for consumers and aim to provide an agile regulatory landscape for that.

I was asked to respond to some specific points, and I will do so briefly before I conclude. The hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) asked me in his opening speech about the powers of the Secretary of State and the safeguards. I point him first towards what is contained in the Bill: it is implicit that a direction should be practically possible to be carried out. There is a duty to consult in clause 2(3) and (4), and there is the appeal to the Competition Appeal Tribunal in schedule 1. I have engaged with the AOA on the points that he raised at the beginning of his speech. The hon. Member for South Antrim asked me about laser pens. I direct him to articles 240 and 241 of the Air Navigation Order 2016 and the Laser Misuse (Vehicles) Act 2018, which contain those powers already; hence they are not in the Bill.

I will pause and say a word or two about general aviation because my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay made a particularly inspiring speech. I pay tribute to the work he has done on the all-party parliamentary group on general aviation. He spoke vividly about STEM, which is massively important for us. It was an outstanding speech, and I would really like another debate to respond to that alone—perhaps another time. It is safe to say for now that we want the UK to be the best place in the world for aviation, and that very much starts at the grassroots.

The hon. Member for Richmond Park asked me about privacy and why it is not in the Bill. It is already taken into account in a number of areas such as the Data Protection Act 2018 and the general data protection regulation, but in this sphere the implementing regulation requires all operators who have a sensor able to capture personal data to be registered. I hope that that provides her with some reassurance. She also asked about new offences and keeping the ability to regulate as drone technology increases. Of course, we keep that under review. There is power in the Civil Aviation Act 1982 that enables us to make air navigation orders to address precisely that point.

I thank the House for listening to me for a little longer than usual while I addressed those specific points. The Bill will support the modernisation of our airspace and the air traffic licensing framework, provide alleviation from the 80/20 rule I have referred to and provide enforcement powers to help the police tackle the unlawful use of unmanned aircraft. I look forward enormously

to working with hon. Members across the House to ensure that this important legislation reaches the statute book shortly. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

AIR TRAFFIC MANAGEMENT AND UNMANNED AIRCRAFT BILL [LORDS] (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Air Traffic Management and Unmanned Aircraft Bill [Lords]:

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Tuesday 23 February 2021.

(3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading

(4) Proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which they are commenced.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

(6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—
(David Rutley.)

Question agreed to.

AIR TRAFFIC MANAGEMENT AND UNMANNED AIRCRAFT BILL [LORDS] (WAYS AND MEANS)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Air Traffic Management and Unmanned Aircraft Bill [Lords], it is expedient to authorise the payment of sums into the Consolidated Fund.—
(David Rutley.)

Question agreed to.

PETITIONS

Extension of statutory paid bereavement leave

6.33 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP)
[V]:

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of North Ayrshire and Arran,

Declares that, given the huge toll of the coronavirus pandemic, there is an urgent need to extend statutory paid bereavement leave to all employees upon the loss of a close family member or partner; further declares that the welcome introduction of paid bereavement leave for parents on the loss of a child up to the age of 18 years old did not go far enough; notes that there is recent research which finds that grief experienced by employees who have lost a loved one costs the UK economy £23 billion per year, and costs the Treasury nearly £8 billion per year; further declares that many employers are supportive and understanding when an employee

suffers a close bereavement, but without any statutory rights for employees to paid bereavement leave, the time and space to grieve for many people is determined by the goodwill of their employer; further that the discretionary nature of current arrangements means potentially thousands of employees will be unable to take leave without fearing that it could undermine their job security; further that it is concerning that bereaved people in low paid jobs are far less likely to receive paid time off or any compassionate leave at all; further that these people are at greater risk of losing their job for taking time off, and that it is grossly unfair for them to struggle with the immediate financial impact of bereavement while experiencing increasing pressure and financial stress; further that bereavement can trigger mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorders, as well as being linked to an increased likelihood of heart attacks, diabetes and increased mortality; and further that while bereavement is a fact of life, if a fraction of the costs associated with it could be mitigated with better support at the right time, we could boost our economy and have a healthier society with a greater sense of wellbeing at its heart.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the UK Government to extend the right to statutory paid bereavement leave to all employees who lose a close family member or partner as a matter of urgency.

[P002647]

Wage floor to the furlough scheme

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab) [V]: The Government currently instruct people to stay at home, but too many simply cannot afford to do so. Ensuring that no one on furlough is paid less than the minimum wage is the least the Government should do, though they should do much more. The following petition is about ensuring that this crisis is not paid for on the backs of low-paid workers. I present to the House of Commons this petition of residents of the United Kingdom, alongside a corresponding petition online, which has gained more than 15,000 signatures on the subject of introducing a wage floor to the furlough scheme.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that no-one should ever be paid less than the National Minimum Wage; further declares that the Government's furlough scheme is leaving millions of low-paid workers on less than this basic minimum pay; notes that new official figures show that over two million workers have been paid less than the National Minimum Wage this year; further that this is nearly five times as many workers as in 2019; and further declares that this crisis should not be paid for on the backs of low-paid workers.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to introduce a wage floor in the furlough scheme to ensure that no worker is paid less than the National Minimum Wage.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002648]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I am now going to suspend the House for a few minutes so that the Chamber can be prepared for the next item of business.

6.38 pm

Sitting suspended.

Deportation of Foreign National Offenders

Motion made, and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn.—(David Rutley.)

6.47 pm

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Before I call the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke), it is obvious that the debate that is about to take place is a delicate matter. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is well aware of the sub judice rule, and that anyone else who seeks to take part in this debate will bear in mind that there must be no reference to any person or case that is currently sub judice.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): I would like to start by briefly placing on record my deep admiration for Captain Sir Tom Moore, after the sad news of his passing today. Like so many of his generation, he was an ordinary man who had extraordinary qualities, and our whole country is the worse for his being no longer with us. He was a remarkable figure; may he rest in peace.

Tonight I had hoped to raise a particular case concerning a constituent, but following the advice I received about the sub judice rules, I will allude to the issue in question in broad terms. I want to discuss the challenges concerning the deportation of foreign national offenders. As we know, under the terms of the UK Borders Act 2007, if someone is sentenced to 12 months or more, they are liable for automatic deportation. If they are sentenced to a term of imprisonment of four years or more, there is a very strong public interest in that deportation going ahead, other than in the most extraordinary circumstances. Clearly that is not happening in a number of cases. I can think of one instance that is very close to my own heart in which this has not been the case.

This leads to wider questions that concern the provisions of the Human Rights Act, and whether it is striking the right balance between the interests of the general public and the rights of defendants. Clearly this issue is going to become increasingly topical, because Home Office statistics show that in 2018—a typical recent year—455 appeals against deportation by foreign national offenders were successful. That was 25% of all such appeals lodged by those convicted criminals. Of the successful appeals, 172 relied on human rights grounds. Each and every week in 2018, therefore, three serious foreign national offenders were sidestepping the UK Borders Act 2007 based on human rights claims. I am afraid it stretches credulity to believe that all these claims were well founded. There must be a concern that instead, immigration lawyers are advising their clients precisely what the right buzzwords are to initiate a successful appeal against being removed from the United Kingdom. There is a pervasive sense that our own high legal standards are being deployed against us to the detriment of the public.

The provisions of the European convention on human rights should be there to protect the innocent against grave and exceptional threats.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on introducing the debate, and he has raised an important issue. Does he agree that for far too

[Jim Shannon]

long the system has been used and abused, but with the end of our membership of Europe must also come the end to the abuse of the decent people of this country? Further, will he join me in asking the Minister to make it clear that the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is a zero-tolerance nation for foreign criminals?

Mr Clarke: I will indeed join the hon. Gentleman in saying just that to the Minister. I know that the hon. Gentleman cares deeply about this issue; he is an assiduous attendee at these debates, indeed the most assiduous attendee in the whole House. It is fantastic to have his support in making these points this evening.

As I was saying, the European convention on human rights should be a bulwark against tyranny. It was designed against the backdrop of the crimes of Nazi Germany against millions of people across our continent. Genocide, torture, rape, mass displacement and theft were their hallmark, and our continent rightly came together to create a legal framework to outlaw them for all time. However, over the decades since, and with increasing voracity, rights creep in both the Strasbourg court and our domestic courts has distorted those noble goals beyond all recognition.

To quote the former Law Lord, Lord Hoffmann:

“The devil is in the detail: in the interpretation by the courts of the high-minded generalities of the written instrument. It is these interpretations, which often appear to people to bear little relation to the values that they think really important in the way our country is governed... Since the Convention rights were incorporated into UK law by the Human Rights Act 1998, the UK courts have followed in the wake of Strasbourg, loyally giving effect to its rulings and the principles (where discernible) laid down in its jurisprudence.”

The result is that the UK courts

“have reached decisions, sometimes with regret and sometimes with enthusiasm, which would have astonished those who agreed to our accession to the Convention in 1950.”

That is very relevant to article 3, which lies at the heart of many of these cases.

Article 3 has been progressively expanded by the Strasbourg court to encompass people’s living standards should they be returned. The 2011 case of *M.S.S. v. Belgium and Greece* was a turning point, with an Afghan asylum seeker able successfully to overturn being returned from Belgium to Greece, through which he had transited, on the basis of the poor living conditions he would face should he be returned there. To say that Greece is an unacceptable place to which to be returned goes so far beyond what the convention authors would have imagined as inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment as to be almost unbelievable, but it has established a principle and opened the doors still wider for those seeking to overturn deportation orders across the continent, including in this country.

The upshot of such decisions is that we have a human rights settlement that often seems to protect perpetrators far more effectively than victims and that repeatedly allows serious offenders to cite their rights to escape the consequences of their actions. I do not blame my hon. Friend the Minister for the impasse in a number of such cases, as he is exceptionally helpful and courteous and I know he and his colleagues always operate within the law as it stands. However, this whole issue leaves a bitter taste.

We know in many ways that it is only the tip of the iceberg. Last December, the Henry Jackson Society published an excellent report by Dr Rakib Ehsan looking at the issue from the perspective of foreign national terrorist offenders. It identified 45 convicted Islamist terrorists whom we have been unable to deport on human rights grounds since 1998, largely driven by article 3 and article 8, the latter being the right to a family life. Our inability to deport in the way we would like leaves us unable to rid ourselves of people who are a genuine threat to our society, and I have a number of questions for my hon. Friend the Minister that I hope he can address in his reply.

The first question is whether the Minister has considered extending the principle of deportation with assurances to all cases involving foreign national offenders, as opposed to simply those concerning individuals suspected of terrorism. It seems to me that this is a concept well worth exploring. If we can secure appropriate guarantees from other Governments that they will not mistreat criminals we deport back to them, that ought to suffice.

Secondly, as part of the fair borders legislation being delivered by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, which I warmly welcome, will the Government act to tighten relevant legal definitions, such as “inhuman” and “degrading”, to strengthen the Home Office’s defence against judicial activism? As I have set out, the steady extension through case law of what those definitions can encompass is clearly interfering with the deportation of foreign national offenders, particularly on the grounds of article 3 of the ECHR, which is of great relevance to a number of cases.

Thirdly, what wider work is ongoing within Government to assess how we can reform our human rights settlement, so as to ensure that we have effective deportation options at our disposal, and that our citizens are protected properly from those who ought to be removed under the provisions of the UK Borders Act? I believe we need a root-and-branch reconsideration of those issues. The case for a dedicated British Bill of Rights feels ever stronger, as it would allow us to incorporate core convention rights into our domestic law, define them sensibly in a way that mitigates the accumulated legacy of Strasbourg’s judicial activism, and make the whole settlement accountable to our Parliament and our courts.

As things stand, I do not believe that justice is served in a large number of cases. None of us can be confident that some of the perpetrators will not go on to cause further havoc and harm, and this issue requires our prompt attention. We may have settled a number of issues concerning our relationship with Europe through our recent decision to exit the European Union, but none of that bears on our ongoing challenges regarding our interaction with the European Court of Human Rights and the European convention on human rights. Its goals are noble, but its interpretation in a number of cases is flawed. It is time for action in the course of this Parliament.

6.56 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Chris Philp): I join my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) in extending our sincere condolences to the

family of Captain Tom Moore, who has been a beacon of hope in these dark times. His passing is very sadly mourned, and we will never forget what he stood for during this difficult period in our national history.

I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate and raising this issue. As he said, he wanted expressly to reference a particular constituency case that he has in mind, but he was prevented from doing so by the sub judice rules of the House. However, he has discussed that case in detail with me in private, and I am well seized of the implications of the case and the powerful points that my hon. Friend makes about it.

My hon. Friend has raised the serious issue of the removal of foreign national offenders back to their country of origin—a topic that the Government take extremely seriously. One of a Government's first duties is to protect their citizens, and ensuring that people who are not UK nationals and who commit a serious offence are deported is a vital part of keeping our country safe.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) on securing this debate. Unfortunately I was not able to intervene earlier, but I am interested in the root-and-branch reform that was referred to. When talking about the deportation of foreign nationals, would that include a two-year-old or a four-year-old who has grown up in this country but may have been born elsewhere? Would they be considered a foreign national?

Chris Philp: The hon. Gentleman will be familiar with the provisions in the UK Borders Act 2007, and section 32 sets out that a foreign national, regardless of when they came to the country, is liable for deportation if they commit a criminal offence and are sentenced to more than 12 months in prison. That is the law as written—a law passed by the last Labour Government, and which this Government are now implementing. There are, of course, some exceptions to the duty under the 2007 Act—an Act passed by the last Labour Government—which include when deportation would breach the foreign national's rights under the European convention, or where they have been granted asylum. The right to a family life under article 8 is qualified and balanced, so where someone has been sentenced to at least four years' imprisonment, the article 8 claim will only succeed where there are very compelling circumstances. The short answer to the hon. Gentleman's question is yes, deportation will apply regardless of how long the person has been here under the Act that the Labour Government passed 13 years ago.

Matt Western: I thank the Minister for being so precise—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Gentleman has not done anything wrong. It being 7 o'clock, we must have the Adjournment motion again. It is so awkward when that happens during an intervention.

7 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(David Rutley.)

Matt Western: I think many would echo the points made by the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland about the need for a root-and-branch reform. Does the Minister agree that that element of the 2007 Act should be reconsidered?

Chris Philp: I do not want to pre-empt any reviews that may take place, but this Government are committed to ensuring that dangerous foreign national offenders who put our constituents' lives and safety at risk are deported as required by the 2007 Act. I am aware of a case—I will not go into the details, for obvious reasons—involving a person who was subject to deportation proceedings about a year ago but was removed under a last-minute legal challenge from those proceedings. A few months later, that person was arrested and charged with murder—a murder that would not have happened had deportation gone ahead.

We should not underestimate the importance to public safety of ensuring that dangerous foreign national offenders are deported, nor should we underestimate the impact on victims. I have heard about the victim in the case that my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland wanted to raise this evening, and the impact on them is absolutely horrendous. I come across cases on an almost weekly basis of distressed victims who have suffered appalling crimes, including rape, whose perpetrators are fighting deportation. That causes the victims to be retraumatised because they feel, rightly, that the perpetrators, where they are not UK nationals, should be removed.

This Government stand with the victims in this debate. This Government stand with the citizens who rightly want to be protected, and we make no apology for doing so. That is why, since 2009, we have returned more than 6,400 foreign criminals. I should say that, of those, approximately two thirds—4,400—were European economic area nationals, and about one third—2,000—were from outside Europe. That rebuts any claim that this policy is applied in a way that is in any way racist, since two thirds of those being deported are of European nationality. Even this year, when things have been very difficult with the pandemic, we have continued deporting dangerous foreign national offenders on scheduled flights and on more than 30 charter flights. The work continues, and I expect that as coronavirus passes, it will be stepped up once again.

My hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland posed a series of questions towards the end of his excellent speech, for which I strongly commend him. He asked what the Government would do to try to avoid challenges where dangerous foreign national offenders seek to invoke human rights and other things to avoid deportation. We do plan to take action in this area and to legislate to make the legal process clearer. One problem we face is that foreign national offenders can raise repeated challenges, often strung out over many years. Many of these challenges are vexatious or totally without merit, yet they can make these challenges again and again to frustrate their deportation. So the legal system is not working as cleanly and effectively as it should, and we do plan to legislate in the very near future to fix that issue.

My hon. Friend asked whether we would tighten various definitions in statute and, where we can do that, we certainly intend to. This differs a little depending on the matter concerned. Some things are relatively

[Chris Philp]

straightforward to clarify in domestic legislation. Others areas are more complicated. For example, he mentioned article 3 rights in particular. He is right to point out that those rights have been expanded by case law over time. But as matters currently stand, domestic courts in the UK are bound to follow European Court of Human Rights case law on things such as article 3.

The whole area of the interaction of the human rights decisions made in Strasbourg with domestic law is, of course, governed by the Human Rights Act 1998. Just in the last few weeks, the Ministry of Justice, under the supervision of my right hon. and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor, has announced an independent review of that Act, which will look at the interaction of the domestic courts and the European Court of Human Rights, the impact of the Act on the relationship between the judiciary, the Executive and the legislature, and other related matters.

I believe that a combination of domestic legislation on the process, the systems and some definitions will make it harder for foreign national offenders to unreasonably

prevent their deportation, and that review of the operation of the Human Rights Act may provide some additional pointers. I should say that the members of that panel are extremely distinguished. They include a former very senior judge, a former president of the Law Society, two QCs and two professors. It is a very distinguished panel and I am sure Members of the House will be very interested to hear what they say when they report in a few months' time, over the summer.

In conclusion, let me make it clear to my hon. Friend once again, and of course to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), that this Government's commitment to deport dangerous foreign national offenders, as required by the 2007 Act, which was passed by the last Labour Government, is unwavering. We are determined to protect our fellow citizens from harm and that includes doing everything we lawfully can to remove foreign national offenders.

Question put and agreed to.

7.7 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 2 February 2021

TREASURY

Publication of “The Economics of Biodiversity: The Dasgupta Review”

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Kemi Badenoch): At spring statement 2019, the Government commissioned an independent, global review on the economics of biodiversity. Today, “The Economics of Biodiversity: The Dasgupta Review” has been published.

At the start of an important year for global action to tackle biodiversity loss and climate change, the Government thanks Professor Sir Partha Dasgupta for his independent review and welcomes its publication as a strong example of UK thought leadership on an important environmental issue with clear—but often overlooked—economic consequences. The Government will examine the review’s findings and respond formally in due course.

The review is published on <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/final-report-the-economics-of-biodiversity-the-dasgupta-review>, and a copy will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS752]

EDUCATION

Higher Education: Student Hardship Funding

The Minister for Universities (Michelle Donelan): The Government recognise that this academic year has been incredibly difficult for students. We asked most students not to return to campus at the beginning of this term because of the need to reduce the transmission of the coronavirus (covid-19) and because of concern about the effect of the coronavirus variant. This has prevented many students from reoccupying their term-time accommodation following the Christmas break. Many students remain at their non-term-time locations and are accessing their teaching online at present. As a result of these exceptional circumstances, some students are facing financial hardship, with some now incurring additional costs at their alternative address. These challenges were acknowledged by the Prime Minister on 7 January.

I have now announced that we will be making available an additional £50 million of hardship funding this financial year. In total we have made £70 million of funding available for student hardship, given the £20 million made available to higher education providers in December. The funding will be distributed by the Office for Students to universities, which will have flexibility in how they award the funding to students, including international students, in a way that will best prioritise those in greatest need. Providers are best placed to assess student hardship locally. As an example, support might include assistance for students facing additional costs arising from having to maintain accommodation in more than one location, or an inability to maintain their employment potentially in a job based close to their term-time accommodation—if they are not able to access the coronavirus job retention support scheme (CJRS). Alternatively, support may include help for students to access teaching remotely, or for students who have already applied for hardship funding previously but now need additional support. We are working with the Office for Students to allocate these funds and further detail will be set out in due course.

I am extremely grateful for the work universities and other higher education providers are doing to support students during these unprecedented times. This funding will allow providers to build on measures that are already in place.

I welcome the news that a number of universities and large accommodation providers have already offered rent refunds for students who have been asked to stay away from their accommodation. While universities and private accommodation providers are autonomous and responsible for setting their own rental agreements, the Government are encouraging universities and large-scale private accommodation providers that have not yet done so to offer refunds or other financial compensation. The Government are also encouraging all providers of student accommodation to make sure their accommodation policies have students’ best interests at heart. We also urge them to communicate their policies clearly and to be fair.

I realise that this year has been incredibly difficult for students, staff and their families, and I want to assure them that their welfare is our top priority. The measures set out here aim to target support at those students with the greatest need and we will continue to monitor the situation to look at what impact this funding is having. I want to thank universities for their tireless work to ensure that students do not have to put their lives or academic journeys on hold.

[HCWS753]

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**not later than
Tuesday 9 February 2021**

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