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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 4 February 2021

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

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

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

Oral Answers to Questions

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Culture Recovery Fund

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): What progress his Department has made on delivering support for the culture and heritage sector through the culture recovery fund. [911814]

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): What progress his Department has made on delivering support for the culture and heritage sector through the culture recovery fund. [911816]

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): What progress his Department has made on delivering support for the culture and heritage sector through the culture recovery fund. [911820]

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): What progress his Department has made on delivering support for the culture and heritage sector through the culture recovery fund. [911823]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston): Over £1 billion-worth of funding from the culture recovery fund has already been allocated across all four nations of the UK. The funding is supporting over 3,000 arts and heritage organisations in England alone and more than 75,000 jobs.

Giles Watling [V]: I thank my hon. Friend for his answer. It is great that the Government are taking the theatre sector seriously, as demonstrated by this fund, but there is so much more that we can do to help our cultural offer that is not just cash injection. I implore him to push the Government to re-engage with the European Union on visa and carnet-free travel for performers, their kit and their support teams. I know that the EU walked away from our offer, but it must be brought back to the table. Touring performers will be left with a double whammy of an industry devastated

by covid and the loss of an entire continent as a venue. Will he please bang the table and get the EU back to talk on this?

Nigel Huddleston: First, I thank my hon. Friend for banging the table so well for the culture sector over so many years. As my hon. Friend the Minister for Digital and Culture has previously said, the door always remains open should our European friends wish to reconsider our mutually beneficial proposals, which would have allowed UK touring professionals to tour more easily, but they rejected them. In the meantime, where visas apply, our agreement with the EU contains measures designed to make the necessary processes as smooth as possible. A working group has been set up by the Secretary of State to look at any obstacles that might face British performers seeking to tour. We will continue to seek to co-operate with our European friends on this important issue.

Marco Longhi [V]: The £1.5 billion culture recovery fund has provided a lifeline to the culture and heritage sector during the pandemic. Does the Minister agree, though, that public money should not be spent on ideologically motivated projects by people who hate our history and seek to rewrite it, and will he review funding allocations accordingly?

Nigel Huddleston: I thank my hon. Friend for his deep interest in the heritage and cultural sector, which we have talked about on many occasions. He is absolutely right that the culture recovery fund has been a lifeline for heritage and cultural organisations. These grants are intended to help organisations with essential costs associated with operating, reopening, mothballing and recovery. I can assure him that the culture recovery fund money is awarded by our arm's length bodies according to a strict set of criteria, and the funding goes to organisations in need of serious financial support, not for ideological projects. In addition, any grant award above £1 million is reviewed by the independent Culture Recovery Board to add additional assurance that funding is going where it is most needed.

Mrs Latham [V]: Because of the nature of the industry, many performers organise their business in such a way that they sometimes fall through the cracks of Government support. What support is the Minister making available to performers who are not in an eligible organisation for the purposes of the culture recovery fund, such as ballet dancers, actors, musicians and many more?

Nigel Huddleston: May I first take the opportunity to wish my hon. Friend a very happy birthday?

The Government have supported self-employed persons in the performing arts sector through a number of pan-economic schemes, including the self-employment income support scheme. According to the latest statistics, over two thirds of self-employed people have been eligible for this scheme. Tens of thousands have been eligible within the culture sector, and they have claimed during its first, second and third phases. In addition, Arts Council England has given over £47 million in awards to individuals through non-CRF funds in this financial year alone, and that is on top of the 75,000 jobs being sustained through the CRF directly.

Mr Speaker: Have a good day, Pauline, and enjoy the rest of your birthday.

Jack Lopresti [V]: Aerospace Bristol in my constituency is very grateful to the Government for the support it received from its successful bid during the first round of the culture recovery fund, which was in excess of £500,000. Like many other museums, it will continue to need revenue support until it can reopen. Can my hon. Friend assure me that the current bid by Aerospace Bristol under round 2 of the fund will be given a sympathetic hearing?

Nigel Huddleston: I was very pleased that the excellent aerospace museum in my hon. Friend's constituency received money from the culture recovery fund in the first round. It is a wonderful showcase of world-class British engineering, and I can confirm that organisations in receipt of grant funding from the first round of the CRF were eligible to apply to the second round. I am sure that the Aerospace Bristol museum will get a fair hearing as he requests, but it is important to say that all decisions on CRF grants are made by our independent arm's length bodies, which are committed to a transparent and robust decision-making process.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab) [V]: Further to the question asked by the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) just now—happy birthday to her—I think I heard the Minister say that a third of self-employed people in the creative sector were not able to access the self-employment scheme, minus those supported by extra schemes made available by Arts Council England, which I think he said was about £47 million of support. Can he calculate for us how many people in the creative sector have been forgotten by the support schemes so far? Will he say what representations he has made to the Treasury to aid that remaining number of people?

Nigel Huddleston: I thank the hon. Lady. To clarify, I said that over two thirds of people who are self-employed in the country have been eligible for self-employment income support. Within the arts, entertainment and recreation sector, more than 60,000 people applied for and have received SEIS funding in phase 3. Some 76,000 did so in phase 1, and 72,000 did so in phase 2. As I said, Arts Council England has given additional support to the tune of £47 million of awards to individuals through non-CRF funds already.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con) [V]: The culture recovery fund was a great advent, but it will only go so far. It was never intended to cover three lockdowns and potentially 18 months of disruption. The news that the Lowry in Manchester has relaunched its emergency public appeal is a warning beacon blazing in our cultural landscape. Does the Minister recognise that more targeted help will be needed for our world-leading arts and cultural sectors? What plans are in train to deliver that help? Is a culture recovery fund 2 necessary?

Nigel Huddleston: I understand my hon. Friend's concern, and I take the opportunity to recognise what a champion he is for our country's cultural and creative industries. Some £400 million of CRF funding was held back from the first round of funding as a contingency

to support cultural organisations later on in the pandemic. That now forms the basis of the second round of grant funding, which is currently being processed. I can assure him that we will continue to work with organisations to support flexibility in their plans, should the wider context change following awards being made. We have already extended the time period over which some of the original funds can be spent, and we are always in conversations with the Chancellor and the Treasury.

Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games

Theo Clarke (Stafford) (Con): What progress his Department has made in preparing for the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth games. [911815]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston): We remain on track to deliver a fantastic games on time and on budget. It will bring lasting benefits for Birmingham, the west midlands and the whole country. The west midlands region will benefit from a £778 million investment to stage the 2022 Commonwealth games in Birmingham, including £594 million of funding from central Government. Along with our partners, we continue to work hard to deliver the games in what are obviously very challenging circumstances.

Theo Clarke [V]: I know many people, including me, are looking forward to the Commonwealth games next year. I thank my hon. Friend for his answer, but does he also agree that the games will give a much-needed boost to the tourism and hospitality sectors, as well as providing excellent opportunities and a lasting legacy for people and businesses in Staffordshire and across the west midlands?

Nigel Huddleston: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Birmingham 2022 will be largest sporting event ever held in the west midlands, delivering a wealth of excellent opportunities, including £350 million in procurement opportunities for local businesses, world-class sporting facilities, a comprehensive volunteering programme and a vibrant cultural programme. The organising committee has created a dedicated business portal called "FinditinBirmingham", where any business can register to be informed about procurement opportunities. To date, more than 40 opportunities worth around £250 million have been listed on the portal. In addition, our excellent, top-calibre West Midlands Mayor, Andy Street, has championed a £24 million business and tourism programme to help maximise the considerable long-term opportunities for the games.

EU Travel: Performing Artists

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What recent steps his Department has taken towards establishing cultural visas for (a) performing artists, (b) musicians and (c) support staff with the EU. [911817]

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): What steps he plans to take to review arrangements for touring artists to travel in the EU. [911824]

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): What recent steps his Department has taken towards establishing cultural visas for (a) performing artists, (b) musicians and (c) support staff with the EU. [911837]

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support touring (a) musicians and (b) crew in Europe.
[911843]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Oliver Dowden): The UK's creative industries are the finest in the world, and this Government are, of course, determined to support them. I deeply regret that the EU rejected our proposals, which would have enabled performers, artists and support staff to work freely across Europe. In recent weeks, I have discussed our approach with leading voices from music, including the head of Universal Music globally and, yesterday, Sir Elton John and his manager, David Furnish. We are working urgently to develop a plan to make it easier to tour across all of Europe.

Gavin Newlands [V]: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer, such as it was. This Government's Brexit reality has the live music industry staring into the abyss and sports such as Formula 1 unable to operate sufficiently. Mark Davyd, CEO of the Music Venue Trust, has said that his industry has been dealt a no-deal Brexit due to the UK Government's refusal to get a deal on touring visas with the EU. Will the Secretary of State assure the music industry, F1 and others that he will put their livelihoods before anti-free movement platitudes and go back to the negotiating table with the EU?

Oliver Dowden: Of course we continue to engage with the EU. As I say, I deeply regret that it rejected our offer. It is worth noting that what we put forward was what the music industry had asked for. We will continue to engage with the music industry, and there are opportunities both with individual member states and with the Commission directly.

Daisy Cooper [V]: One of my constituents is the orchestral leader of two major British orchestras. More than 50% of her work with British orchestras is touring abroad in the EU, but she is a self-employed musician, so she does not have anybody to wade through all this new red tape for her. Putting covid to one side, by what specific date does the Secretary of State hope to fix this absurd, bureaucratic, self-defeating situation, so that self-employed musicians can enjoy visa-free travel in the EU?

Oliver Dowden: I agree with the hon. Lady: it is absurd and self-defeating. It could have been solved, and it could still be solved today by the EU matching the offer that we have unilaterally made to EU nationals. She talks about support. I know her constituency well; it neighbours mine. For example, The Horn music venue in her constituency, which is a home to emergent artists, has received a quarter of a million pounds under the culture recovery fund. The Goblin theatre has received £51,000. Wind and Foster has received £63,000. We are demonstrating as a Government through our actions that we are standing behind culture in this country.

Owen Thompson: The Government are very keen to blame the EU for the barriers being put in place for touring musicians, but Brexit was born and bred in the UK. Does the Secretary of State agree that the onus is on this Government to fix the abject failure in statecraft, and can he confirm what urgent steps are being taken to ensure that touring musicians do not become yet another example of the collateral damage of Brexit?

Oliver Dowden: First, I would like to reassure touring musicians and all those in the creative industry. I know how important the opportunity to tour is for them; it is something I discussed just yesterday with Elton John, and I have discussed it with many others. It is a vital part of them building their careers. That is why we have set up the working group with musicians, so that we can find ways of supporting them to continue to tour not just in Europe but across the whole world. There are huge opportunities for the industry.

Fleur Anderson [V]: I am glad to hear that you are still working with the EU bureaucrats—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am definitely not doing that. The hon. Lady is accusing me by saying "you".

Fleur Anderson: Sorry. I am glad to hear that the Secretary of State is working with the EU on this. Music is worth £5.8 billion to the UK economy, and I have been surprised at how many Putney residents and businesses rely on touring. I am glad to hear that the Secretary of State is working on a future plan. Will that plan be across the EU, not requiring red tape for each individual country, which will be a huge barrier? What is the Government's plan to ensure that creative workers do not miss out on vital earning opportunities and a chance to represent Britain on the global stage?

Oliver Dowden: I share the hon. Lady's passion for the creative industries. That is why we have put the support in, including in her own constituency. For example, the World Heart Beat Music Academy has received over £100,000, and the Exodus track and the Deptford Northern Soul Club have received over £50,000. On what we are doing to promote touring, there are basically three threads to it: first, we are working with the industry to help it overcome barriers. Secondly, we are working across Government to overcome barriers; and, thirdly, we continue to engage both with the Commission and member states to see what further support we can provide.

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP) [V]: I deeply regret that Ministers have rejected the EU's offer. Like petulant weans, Ministers have walked away from negotiations on musicians' and artists' visas. The Government did not get what they wanted, and have given up. Stating that the UK's door remains open is simply not good enough for the people who desperately need visa-free travel in the EU. Without it, there will be disastrous consequences. British haulage firms go on tours, but they will go bust. British crews will lose out to cheaper competitors from the EU, and all but the most successful bands will struggle to tour in Europe. The result will be bad for the economy and bad for culture. Surely the Secretary of State must now realise, as so many Tory MPs do, that renegotiations are the only option. Going off in a huff is not the answer; this is all far too important.

Oliver Dowden: To be clear to the hon. Gentleman, the reason why we rejected the offer from the European Union, which he seems so keen to accept, was that it was not binding, it did not cover touring, it did not cover technical support staff and, crucially, it did not cover work permits. Of course, we continue to engage with it, but I must say to him that the most devastating consequences for musicians in Scotland would be to rip

our precious shared cultural heritage apart by pulling Scotland out of our Union—I would note that £450 million a year is generated in Scotland through domestic music tourism; 90% of the revenue is through domestic markets—and that would be terrible for Scottish musicians.

Far-right Online Conspiracy Theories

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): What steps he is taking to prevent the spread of far-right conspiracy theories online. [911818]

The Minister for Digital and Culture (Caroline Dinenage): The Government take the issue of disinformation, including far-right conspiracy theories, very seriously, and DCMS is leading work across Government to tackle this. Our counter-disinformation unit brings together monitoring and analysis capabilities across Government, and we work closely with social media platforms to ensure that swift action is taken and authoritative sources of information are promoted.

Gill Furniss [V]: To tackle far-right extremism and conspiracy theories that undermine our vaccine roll-out, new legislation is urgently needed. Social media companies must take responsibility for the content shared on their platforms. Can the Minister therefore update the House on when the online harms Bill will be introduced, and give her assurances that the Bill will achieve this vital aim, which will keep our country safe?

Caroline Dinenage: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. As I have said, tackling disinformation in all its forms, including vaccine disinformation, remains a key priority for the UK. As we set out in the full Government response, the online safety Bill will introduce a duty of care that requires companies to address online harms such as harmful disinformation that could impact on people's health and safety on their platforms, and that legislation will be put forward this year.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab) [V]: Mr Speaker:

“No one should have to accept racist abuse as the price to pay for being in the public eye”,

the Secretary of State assured footballers. No one should have to accept racist abuse full stop, and no one should be subject to extremist grooming or have their lives endangered by anti-vax misinformation, but they are, and for 10 years Conservative Governments have refused to act. As the head of UK Counter Terrorism Policing tells us, extremism has become so widespread online that it “cannot be policed”. Will the Minister say what steps she has taken to protect us and, please, no more vague assurances for the future?

Caroline Dinenage: Of course, we want the internet to be a very safe space for all users, and we are very clear that what is unacceptable online is just as important as what is unacceptable offline. That is why we are absolutely committed to tackling extremist views, racist views and views that promote violence, hatred and division against individuals and against communities. We want the internet to be a safe space for all users, which is why the online harms framework will require companies to have very clear terms and conditions about how they

would respond to such hateful content, and they will be expected to implement those conditions consistently and transparently.

Covid-19: Leisure Centres

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): What steps his Department has taken to support local leisure centres during the covid-19 outbreak. [911819]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston): Sport and physical activity are incredibly important for our physical and mental health and are a vital weapon against coronavirus. The Government recognise the integral role local leisure centres play in providing vital facilities within their communities, and last year the Government announced a £100 million national leisure recovery fund to support public sector leisure centres to reopen. Applications to the scheme have now closed, but I am pleased to say that over 99% of local authorities that were eligible for the scheme have applied, and funding decisions are currently being made and will be announced shortly.

Simon Fell [V]: Dalton community leisure centre in my constituency is badly in need of support. It is a fantastic organisation—a community-run charity with a devoted team led by Bernard McPeake—but covid has hit it very hard, with losses running into the hundreds of thousands of pounds. It supports 17 schools and the national leisure centre recovery fund offers a ray of hope. What comfort can my hon. Friend offer organisations like Dalton that they will be supported by this scheme?

Nigel Huddleston: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the pivotal role played by Dalton community leisure centre, and indeed leisure centres up and down the country, in sustaining physical and mental health in their communities. That is precisely why we announced the fund. I cannot pre-empt the award that my hon. Friend will be getting locally at this moment in time, but of course we know it will make a real impact for the reasons he articulated. Also, as we have said before, reopening sports facilities overall will be an absolute priority when the time comes to begin easing some of the current restrictions.

Digital Divide

16. **Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): What recent steps he has taken to tackle the digital divide. [911821]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Warman): Now more than ever it is obvious that the value of closing the digital divide is great. That is why we have worked with industry to provide the connectivity for vulnerable users that they need, why we will continue to encourage providers to offer social tariffs, and why, to boost digital skills, adults can undertake specified digital qualifications up to level 1 free of charge.

Andrew Gwynne [V]: Coronavirus and lockdown has sped up society's reliance on online services, but 42% of those aged 75 and above do not use the internet and Age UK says that

“there is little evidence that the pandemic has led to significant numbers of those previously digitally excluded getting online”,

so what are the Government doing to help older people access the equipment and training they need to get online, and to ensure that essential services such as NHS services and banking continue to be delivered equally to those who remain offline?

Matt Warman: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to highlight the need for that equality of access. The Department continues to work across government to make sure that, whether for supermarkets or banks, there is that equality of access, and of course the NHS makes all the efforts it can, as it has recently in the vaccination programme, to ensure that people are contacted in a way that suits them. But the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to highlight the issue, and it is why the Department will also work with organisations such as Citizens Advice to tackle what is a perennial problem.

Anti-Vaccination Content Online

Rob Roberts (Delyn) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to tackle anti-vaccination content online. [911822]

The Minister for Digital and Culture (Caroline Dinéage): The Government take the issue of vaccine misinformation very seriously, and DCMS is leading work across Government to tackle this through the counter-disinformation unit. We are working closely with social media platforms to help them identify and take action to remove incorrect claims about the virus, including anti-vax content that could endanger people's health.

Rob Roberts: My sister is bravely battling cancer for the second time, so I was excited to tell everyone who has supported her on social media last night that she would be receiving her vaccine on Saturday. Within minutes, some very special individual was spouting anti-vax nonsense on that post. In six months last year, Facebook removed 12 million pieces of content and put labels on 167 million more that failed fact checking. Anti-vax rhetoric puts lives at risk. What practical steps can my hon. Friend take to work with social media platforms to make the point that freedom of speech is not absolute if it leads to societal harm?

Caroline Dinéage: It is lovely to see my hon. Friend in real life. I am very sorry to hear about his sister's health concerns. I wish her a very speedy recovery and I am really pleased that she has got her vaccination.

Freedom of expression is an essential quality for a thriving democracy, but the act of sharing misinformation should not be confused with well-intentioned citizens asking perfectly valid questions about the safety of the vaccine. Of course, it is really important that harmful disinformation that is designed to undermine people's confidence in these vital vaccines is addressed and removed as quickly as possible. That is why we are working so closely with social media platforms and have secured a commitment with them to ensure that authoritative messages about vaccine safety reach as many people as possible.

Topical Questions

[911774] **Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab):** If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Oliver Dowden): Last week, I met a number of footballers to discuss the issue of racist and misogynistic abuse on social media as part of a series of roundtables on the future of football. To be clear, we will not tolerate racism in any form, and we are committed to holding platforms to account through our new online safety laws, which we set out to the House in December. I also held a roundtable this week with players and campaigners across a number of sports to discuss the issue of concussion and what more can be done to improve player safety. Of course, in the meantime, we continue to work across Government on a road map for the recovery and reopening of our sectors.

Mary Glindon [V]: The hopes and ambitions of thousands of Newcastle United fans for their great club are caught in limbo due to the ongoing takeover saga that the English Premier League helped to create. Can there be a more pressing reason for the Secretary of State to deliver the fan-led review of football governance promised in his party's 2019 manifesto?

Oliver Dowden: I reassure the hon. Lady that I remain firmly committed to the fan-led review, and events such as the meetings to discuss racism that I mentioned will help to frame it. Certainly, the events relating to football finance over the past year have demonstrated the need for that, and we will be making further progress on it this year.

[911775] **Saqib Bhatti (Meriden) (Con) [V]:** If I were to make a report of online abuse to a social media company, it is likely that a team halfway across the world would look at it and that I would not get a response for a few weeks. It may even not be classed as abuse, because the team may not understand nuances in the English language. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it would be better for social media companies to use UK-based teams that understand nuances in the English language—what is abuse and what is not—and are therefore quicker in responding and perhaps more effective in stamping out online abuse and racism?

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend makes a very important point, and that is something that I have raised with social media companies. I know that many people are concerned that the moderators are not actually based in the United Kingdom, and speed of response is crucial. Through our online safety Bill, we will require social media companies to take swift and effective action against criminal abuse online, and as part of that we will put in place effective user reporting and redress mechanisms.

Mr Speaker: I call the acting shadow Secretary of State, Christian Matheson.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): I am not quite sure about that yet, Mr Speaker, but thank you for the introduction.

The Minister for Media and Data, the right hon. Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale), who is not in his place this morning, has rightly won praise for his work on journalistic freedom and the protection of journalists, so may I ask the Secretary of State what advice he would give to fellow Ministers who respond to standard queries from journalists with public attacks and Twitter pile-ons?

Oliver Dowden: May I begin by welcoming the hon. Gentleman to his place and, on behalf of the whole Conservative party, wishing the hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) a swift recovery? I know that she is doing very well.

The hon. Gentleman mentions press freedoms. I have been working closely with my right hon. Friend the Minister for Media. We will shortly be publishing the material to which the hon. Gentleman refers—that is to say, the action plan to provide safety for journalists. That will be coming forth very shortly.

Christian Matheson: I thank the Secretary of State for his kind words about my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens); she will be watching and will be very grateful.

Ofcom is to become a super-regulator with a huge breadth of responsibilities and all their technical complexities, particularly in the digital sphere: online harms and safety, the BBC and broadcasting in general, security of telecoms infrastructure against hostile threats, broadband, and the Post Office. Does the Secretary of State agree that the new chair of Ofcom should have at least some knowledge of and experience in those complex sectors in order to be appointed?

Oliver Dowden: As the hon. Gentleman will know, the position of Ofcom chair is vacant. I can update the House that I will shortly be launching the competition for that new role, and a number of excellent candidates have already expressed an interest.

[911777] **Craig Whittaker** (Calder Valley) (Con) [V]: I have grave concerns about restricting the advertising of products that are high in fat, sugar and salt, because I am not convinced that a level playing field on enforcement can be achieved between broadcasters and online platforms. How does my right hon. Friend plan to make such platforms legally responsible under statutory rules for ensuring that advertising for food and drink that is high in fat, sugar and salt does not appear online?

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend raises an important point. Covid has been a stark reminder of the importance of reducing obesity, and that is why it is right that we look to restrict the advertising of those products. I have been clear from the beginning in my discussions with the Prime Minister and others that we must ensure equivalence between the approaches to traditional broadcasting platforms and online. Any restrictions should not disproportionately disadvantage broadcasters over online providers, which is why we will bring in reforms to both media at the same time.

[911776] **Kim Johnson** (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab) [V]: In the light of the arrest of freelance photographer and National Union of Journalists member Andy Aitchison following his reporting on a demonstration at Napier barracks in Kent, what steps is the Secretary of State taking to prevent undue interference with the freedom of the press to freely report on the conditions in which asylum seekers are held?

Oliver Dowden: Freedom of expression is one of the cherished liberties that we have fought for, and one that Members of this House have defended for generations.

I fully intend to continue to promote freedom of expression. As part of that, we will be publishing the plan for the protection of journalists, which will be coming forward shortly, as I said to the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson)

[911780] **Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con) [V]: Many people, including those with very limited resources, suffer online harms as a result of financial scams promoted on the likes of Facebook and Google. Will my right hon. Friend consider including protections and provisions against that in his forthcoming online harms legislation?

Oliver Dowden: Like my hon. Friend, I am deeply concerned about the growth of online fraud, and we are working closely with industry and law enforcement to disrupt those committing crimes online. While the online harms legislation will focus on user-generated content, we are also determined to tackle fraud such as phishing and fake websites. The Government's "Cyber Aware" campaign has been set up to inform the public about how to keep safe online.

[911778] **Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): I hope the Secretary of State will join me in congratulating the team at Celtic Connections on an amazing virtual festival over the past few weeks, but the artists performing there are desperate to get back in front of live audiences, including many of my constituents. Instead of indulging in a blame game with the European Union, when will there be actual progress on ensuring visa-free travel for our world-class artists?

Oliver Dowden: I join the hon. Gentleman in congratulating Celtic Connections on the huge success of its first wholly virtual festival, with more than 27,000 tickets sold and audiences tuning in from over 16 countries. That is testament to the strength of our United Kingdom. Of course, I will continue to work to provide ways to ensure that artists can continue to tour, but it is a bit rich for the Scottish nationalist party to talk about blame games; they are virtually its *raison d'être*.

[911783] **Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): The Six Nations rugby tournament starts this weekend, with England playing Scotland at what will be a sadly empty Twickenham stadium, but at club level matches are not permitted. What plans does the Minister have to encourage players of all sports, just as soon as it is safe to do so, to get back on to the pitch?

Oliver Dowden: Like my hon. Friend, I very much regret that there will not be fans in the stadiums for the Six Nations, particularly after the interrupted tournament last year, but we in this House all understand the reasons why. We have had to take decisive action to maintain this national lockdown, but we will be working to get fans back in stadiums as soon as it is safe to do so.

ATTORNEY GENERAL

The Attorney General was asked—

Crown Prosecution Service: Apprenticeships

Robert Largan (High Peak) (Con): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of apprenticeship opportunities with the Crown Prosecution Service. [911864]

The Solicitor General (Michael Ellis): The Crown Prosecution Service offers a range of apprenticeships across the legal, human resources, finance, project management, leadership and management professions and has launched a flagship solicitor apprenticeship. The CPS has consistently exceeded the Government's apprenticeship target. It currently employs 287 apprentices and a further 94 are about to enrol on a programme. This year, the CPS will also launch a pilot programme recruiting apprentices from low socioeconomic backgrounds to meet its diversifying law agenda.

Robert Largan [V]: I am grateful for that answer. It is encouraging to hear that the Crown Prosecution Service is offering lots of apprenticeships. However, it is really important that those opportunities are based not just in London but across the whole country, so I ask the Minister: what apprenticeships are being offered in places such as the High Peak?

The Solicitor General: A very good point. The CPS is actively contributing to the Government's levelling-up agenda, offering apprenticeships across the board in a number of professions across England and Wales. I am pleased to say that the CPS East Midlands, where High Peak is, covers my hon. Friend's constituency, and it has had 30 apprentices since 2016 and currently has two members of staff undertaking a solicitor apprenticeship. Upon completion of that, the solicitor apprenticeship results in fully qualified solicitor status and a role as Crown prosecutor.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): There is a backlog of 55,000 cases in our Crown courts, victims are waiting years for their cases to be heard, and CPS letters fail to be of standard nearly 50% of the time. While we welcome apprenticeships in the CPS, staff levels were cut by 31% between 2011 and 2019, so why have the Government Law Officers failed to get to grips with the fundamental crisis facing the CPS and our criminal justice system?

The Solicitor General: I do not accept the characterisation that the hon. Lady puts on the Crown Prosecution Service. Indeed, it is performing very well and the inspectorate confirms that. The position, of course, is—it is National Apprenticeship Week next week—that I and the Government very much support apprenticeships, and it is right that the CPS does the work that it does to support young people and people from other socioeconomic backgrounds in getting apprenticeships. I hope that she is as supportive as we are of apprenticeships. The reality is that the apprenticeship programme has meant that currently at the CPS, 3.8% of the workforce are apprentices, and that is compared with a national target of 2.3%. This is another parameter in which the Crown Prosecution Service is actually doing very well.

Unduly Lenient Sentence Scheme

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the unduly lenient sentence scheme. [911865]

The Solicitor General (Michael Ellis): The unduly lenient sentence scheme is a vital safeguard in our criminal justice system. It permits me to intervene personally

in a case where I consider that a sentencing judge has fallen into a gross error and imposed a sentence that is outside the reasonable range. Sentencing judges do get it right the vast majority of the time, but in those rare cases where they get it wrong, this is a very good scheme that ensures that justice is served.

Martin Vickers [V]: I thank the Minister for his reply, but it is my constituents' view and, I think, the view of constituents up and down the country that too many sentences are too lenient. Do the Law Officers and the Government have any plans to ensure that sentences are at a level that ensures public confidence in the judicial process?

The Solicitor General: I know that my hon. Friend speaks for his constituents and always has done. It is right to say, though, that our judiciary is admired around the world for its impartiality, intelligence, independence and intellectual rigour. It is of essential importance to the rule of law. I can, therefore, reassure my hon. Friend, and reiterate to him that it is rare for judges to get sentencing wrong. It is, of course, important that sentences reflect the seriousness of offending, and I have gone to court myself on several occasions to seek referral of sentences where we have felt they have been too low. However, generally speaking, he will find that sentences meet the gravamen of the crimes.

Serious Fraud Office

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): What steps she is taking to ensure the effectiveness of the Serious Fraud Office. [911866]

The Solicitor General (Michael Ellis): I regularly meet the director of the Serious Fraud Office and her senior leadership team to discuss the SFO's progress in tackling the top level of serious and complex fraud, bribery and corruption. The SFO takes on some of the most complex and difficult cases, and it has delivered significant successes. From 2016-17 to 2019-20, the SFO's successful judicial outcomes rate was 95% by case and 62% by defendant. To date in this financial year, the SFO has agreed two deferred prosecution agreements, making a contribution to Her Majesty's Treasury thereby of over £44 million, including its costs, demonstrating significant value for money.

Mr Sheerman [V]: May I remind the Minister that many people believe that the Serious Fraud Office is seriously underfunded and under-resourced? It has just abandoned its inquiry into British American Tobacco. It is not able to take on the big boys and girls that cause the real trouble here, including serious financial misdeeds. When is he going to start again, look at the Serious Fraud Office, and give it the resources it needs to go after these real problems?

The Solicitor General: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the interest he takes in the Crown Prosecution Service, and the Serious Fraud Office in particular. I know that he has a history of doing so, and we are grateful for it.

The reality is that the SFO has proper funding. The Attorney General and I meet the leaders of the Serious Fraud Office on a regular basis, and they know that this Government support them in what they do. They have,

after all, obtained guilty pleas for bribery offences in the Petrofac case. The hon. Gentleman mentioned one other matter, but the reality is that they have secured convictions and guilty pleas in the Unaoil case, and agreed deferred prosecution agreements with Airbus and Airline Services. In a whole litany of cases they have secured very good results. Although I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's point that there are always more resources that could be utilised, we will continue to support the Serious Fraud Office in its very good work.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con) [V]: May I start by asking the Solicitor General to convey to my right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney General the good wishes of myself and the members of the Select Committee on Justice, as I know she is due to start her maternity leave before we have the next session of questions to the Law Officers?

Does the Solicitor General recognise that it is not just a matter of resources? Both the current and previous directors of the Serious Fraud Office have pointed out that they are handicapped in dealing with some of the most significant corporate crime, because the United Kingdom's law on corporate criminal responsibility—in particular, the need to identify those who are the “directing mind” of the company—does not reflect well modern corporate practice. Will he confirm that there will be swift action once the Law Commission, which the Government have asked to look at this matter, reports at the end of the year, so that we come up to speed and be able to tackle serious corporate crime more effectively, in much the same way as the United States can because it has a more modern and effective legal test?

The Solicitor General: I thank my hon. Friend, the Chair of the Justice Committee, for his remarks. I will convey his remarks—in fact, I know my right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney General will have heard them—wishing her well.

As far as the ability of the Serious Fraud Office to prosecute matters is concerned, as my hon. Friend knows, these issues are kept under constant review. They are very complex cases, and it is right that the law must keep up with issues at hand to enable the Serious Fraud Office and, where appropriate, the Crown Prosecution Service to conduct those services effectively. Those matters are always kept under close review.

Crown Prosecution Service: Fraud Cases

Nicola Richards (West Bromwich East) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the Crown Prosecution Service in tackling fraud cases. [911867]

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the CPS in tackling fraud cases. [911872]

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the Crown Prosecution Service in tackling fraud cases. [911873]

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the Crown Prosecution Service in tackling fraud cases. [911877]

The Attorney General (Suella Braverman): The CPS continues to work with the police and other investigators to prosecute criminal cases involving fraud. In 2019-20, the CPS prosecuted more than 10,000 defendants where fraud and forgery were the principal offence. It also has a dedicated specialist fraud division to deal with serious, complex and difficult cases of fraud that can often result in huge financial loss to victims.

Nicola Richards [V]: Constituents in West Bromwich East have made me aware of some of the latest scams that criminals are using to exploit the public at this difficult time. They include text messages about covid-related grants and even criminals going door to door pretending to sell vaccine doses. Can my right hon. and learned Friend update us on any discussions she has had with the CPS about these specific types of fraud cases?

The Attorney General: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue. Crimes where covid is the context for exploitation and fraudulent behaviour are completely sickening. The Director of Public Prosecutions has made it clear in his interim charging protocol that offences related to covid, including fraud, will be prioritised and that the offenders will be prosecuted. The joint inspectorate report commended the CPS's response to the pandemic, including its ability to move to remote working without any major service interruption. That was noted as a major achievement.

Jacob Young: Those who use this pandemic to exploit vulnerable people really are the lowest of the low. In Redcar and Cleveland, we have had a number of examples of fraudsters trying to trick elderly people in particular with fake vaccines and scam NHS emails. What more can the Government do to crack down on those types of criminals?

The Attorney General: My hon. Friend is right to raise this sickening trend. The Government are committed to stopping criminals benefiting from their ill-gotten gains. In 2019-20, the CPS successfully used its specialist prosecutors to seize more than £100 million through confiscation orders across all offence types.

Robbie Moore: Over the pandemic, we have seen scammers claiming to be from Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, Royal Mail delivery scams, NatWest urging scam warnings out to its customers and, perhaps the lowest of the low, an NHS vaccine scam. Could my right hon. and learned Friend outline how the CPS is working in partnership with those organisations to tackle fraud?

The Attorney General: We are aware that cyber-criminals and fraudsters are attempting to exploit opportunities around the pandemic, as I have said. That is why the Government have invested in the National Economic Crime Centre, which is leading a multi-agency response to tackle serious and organised fraud during the pandemic. The CPS continues to play a key role in this effort, providing early investigative support in serious fraud cases.

Daniel Kawczynski: I, too, would like to join the Chairman of the Select Committee in wishing the Attorney General the very best for the birth of her child and maternity leave afterwards.

At a time when we are hearing about more disturbing cases of fraud, not just against private citizens but against the state and the public purse, will the Attorney General continue to give us information through the House of Commons Library, publicising the success stories of the CPS in following, tackling and prosecuting those fraudsters?

The Attorney General: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind wishes. He is right to highlight the successes that the CPS has had in tackling serious fraud. In recent months, the serious fraud division has brought three high-value investment scammers to justice. These include Joseph Lewis, who ran a £20 million Ponzi scheme fraud for a decade and was sentenced to five years and four months' imprisonment, and Freddy David, an authorised financial consultant who was operating a parallel Ponzi fraud which resulted in a loss of £10.4 million to his victims. He was sentenced to a total of six years in prison and was issued with a confiscation order for just over £1 million.

Covid-19: Pro Bono Legal Services

Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): What steps she is taking to support pro bono legal services during the covid-19 outbreak. [911868]

The Solicitor General (Michael Ellis): I have heard directly from members of both my pro bono committee and the Public Legal Education Committee on the impact of the pandemic on their work. I know that the legal profession has continued valiantly to undertake pro bono work throughout this crisis, and I would like to restate my gratitude to all those who have volunteered their time and experience during this difficult time. It makes me proud to be one of the Government's pro bono champions.

Damien Moore [V]: May I ask my right hon. and learned Friend how my constituents can feel confident that they can still access the pro bono support they need, despite the pandemic?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend asks a good question, and his constituents should feel confident. I was heartened to hear of the overwhelming number of legal professionals across the country who have stepped forward to offer assistance during the pandemic. It is a true testament to the very nature of pro bono; as a tool, it is there to give back and help those most in need. I heard from members of my pro bono committee in September about the impact of the pandemic on their services, and the resilience and flexibility that they have shown in the face of such adversity is very impressive and much appreciated.

Domestic Violence Prosecutions

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): What steps she is taking to increase the number of prosecutions for domestic violence. [911870]

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): What discussions she has had with the Crown Prosecution Service on (a) identifying and (b) publishing the reasons for the change in the rate of prosecutions relating to domestic abuse in the last 12 months. [911876]

The Solicitor General (Michael Ellis): The Government take tackling domestic abuse extremely seriously, as shown, of course, by the introduction of the landmark Domestic Abuse Bill. I am absolutely committed to ensuring that justice is delivered in such cases. In fact, I personally successfully presented the first unduly lenient sentence case of its kind at the Court of Appeal last year on coercive and controlling behaviour. The CPS is working hard to deliver justice and protect the public, and has recently published an ambitious 12-month domestic abuse programme to help narrow the disparity between the reporting of these offences and criminal justice outcomes.

Jessica Morden [V]: About a fifth of crimes reported in lockdown have involved domestic abuse, and there is real concern that the number of specialist domestic violence courts seems to be reducing. Will the Minister commit to strengthen the system and increase the number of specialised courts, so that we can support the hard work of the police and support victims at trial?

The Solicitor General: That is a very good question. We are always looking at ways in which we can support those engaged in this important work. The Government have recently announced several funding packages linked to domestic abuse, including funding to deal with the effects of the covid-19 pandemic on domestic abuse. During the pandemic, the CPS has continued to prioritise domestic abuse cases. In addition to the interim charging protocol, a memorandum of understanding on the subject of domestic abuse was agreed in June across the whole criminal justice system. It supports multi-agency pre-hearing case progression for domestic abuse cases that are listed for trial.

Alex Cunningham [V]: Despite what the Minister says, domestic abuse prosecutions continue to plummet. They had already fallen off the cliff edge before the pandemic hit the justice system, with an annual decrease of some 22% in the year up to March 2020. Will he tell me what pre-emptive action is being taken now to stop this freefall and maintain the confidence of the victims of these deplorable crimes?

The Solicitor General: I hate to focus on this issue, but the reality is that of course all prosecutions have been affected by the pandemic. The whole courts system, as well as most other functioning systems in this country, are necessarily adversely affected by the pandemic. However, the hon. Gentleman has my assurance, and that of the Government, that domestic abuse cases are among the highest priority in the criminal justice system. On joint interim charging, for example, guidance issued by the police and the CPS immediately following the outbreak of covid-19 stated and confirmed that cases should be prioritised where the defendant is being held in custody, and that specifically included high-risk domestic abuse cases. So we are keeping our eye on this. These are extremely important cases and they must and should continue to be given the priority that they deserve.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I, too, offer my congratulations to the Attorney General on her forthcoming maternity leave.

As well as domestic violence prosecutions being down 19%, victims are left waiting for months for their cases to go to court and are increasingly being told to pursue

civil cases instead. Despite the Solicitor General's warm words, it is clear that the Government are letting victims down on every front. With the huge barriers facing victims of domestic abuse, will the Solicitor General join me today in backing the Bar Council's call for non-means-tested legal aid to be made available to victims in the upcoming spending review?

The Solicitor General: Of course, I have to leave spending review issues to my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of Exchequer, but the reality is that the CPS best practice domestic abuse framework seeks to address withdrawal rates by delivering a high-quality service to victims, and it encourages more timely court listings. As the hon. Lady knows, we cannot always guarantee immediate court listings, but the CPS does encourage

more timely court listings for this type of case. The provision of holistic support for victims—including, where appropriate, the support of an independent domestic abuse adviser—is very important. Funding is going into this issue and it is being given priority. More can be done—the hon. Lady is right and in agreement with Government Members that this is an important area of priority—and we will continue to focus on the issue.

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

10.31 am

Sitting suspended.

Treatment of Uyghur Women: Xinjiang Detention Camps

10.34 am

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the treatment of Uyghur women in Xinjiang detention camps.

The Minister for Asia (Nigel Adams): I acknowledge the strength of feeling about the human rights situation in Xinjiang, which is shared by hon. Members across the House. The BBC report to which my hon. Friend refers is chilling. It includes deeply distressing testimony of the rape, torture and dehumanisation of Uyghur women in Xinjiang detention centres. It is a further compelling addition to the growing body of evidence of the gross human rights violations being perpetrated against Uyghur Muslims and other minorities in Xinjiang. The evidence of the scale and severity of these violations is now far reaching. It paints a truly harrowing picture. If China wishes to dispute this evidence, it must allow unfettered access to the region for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights or another independent fact-finding body.

This Government are committed to taking robust action in respect of Xinjiang. That is why on 12 January the Foreign Secretary announced a series of targeted measures to help ensure that British organisations are neither complicit in nor profiting from the human rights violations in the region. This includes a review of export controls as they apply to Xinjiang, the introduction of financial penalties for businesses that do not comply with the Modern Slavery Act 2015, and support for UK Government bodies to exclude suppliers that are complicit in forced labour.

These measures demonstrate to China that there is a reputational and economic cost to its policies in Xinjiang, and it is why the UK has played, and will continue to play, a leading role in building international pressure on China to change course. In October 2019 and June 2020, the UK led the first two joint statements on Xinjiang at the UN. In October 2020, 38 countries joined the UK in a robust statement at the UN Third Committee. This diplomatic action is vitally important. More countries than ever are speaking out about Xinjiang. China has already been forced to change its narrative about the camps, and its denial of these violations is increasingly hard to sustain. The Foreign Secretary has made clear the extent of our concern directly to his counterpart, Foreign Minister Wang Yi, and I have raised the issue with the former Chinese ambassador in London.

On the specific allegations of forced birth control, we have raised these with the Chinese authorities and used our national statement at the UN Human Rights Council last September to draw international attention to this deeply concerning issue.

I can assure the House that we will continue to work with our international partners, including with the new US Administration and through our G7 presidency, to hold China to account for its actions. The UK has called repeatedly for China to abide by the UN's recommendation to release all those who have been arbitrarily detained, and I know that right hon. and hon. Members will join me today in reiterating that call.

Ms Ghani: I thank the Minister for his powerful statement. Yesterday, the BBC broadcast harrowing footage of Chinese state-orchestrated abuse against Uyghur women on an unprecedented scale.

“They had an electric stick, I didn't know what it was, and it was pushed inside my genital tract, torturing me with an electric shock.”

That is the testimony of Tursunay Ziawudun. “They did whatever their evil minds could think of. They were barbarians. I felt I had died. I was dead.” Then there are the gang rapes of Uyghur women by the police in front of other camp detainees, as a form of re-education, seeking out those who look away to punish them even further.

These horrifying stories add to the huge and growing body of evidence detailing atrocities perpetrated by the Chinese authorities in Xinjiang—atrocities that may even be genocidal. These horrors have led the Board of Deputies of British Jews to compare the plight of the Uyghurs to the Holocaust. But as everybody in this House knows, there is no prospect of China being held to account through the International Criminal Court or the International Court of Justice. So I ask the Minister: how will the Government get the court judgment they need to act when all international routes are paralysed by China? We cannot be bystanders to the deliberate attempt to exterminate a group of people. Not again.

Will the Minister make a promise today that no further deepening of ties of any kind will take place with China until a full judicial inquiry has investigated these crimes? Will he commit himself to a meeting with Rahima Mahmut, a Uyghur survivor, who is known by so many in this House? Rahima is a brave woman, risking her safety to save her family and her people. The United Kingdom cannot stand by and do nothing about the extermination of the Uyghur—mass rapes, scalping and forced sterilisations. We can act and we must act.

Nigel Adams: May I thank my hon. Friend again for her powerful questions and her speech? I know how important this is to her. I reiterate that the Foreign Secretary announced a series of measures on 12 January in response to the human rights situation in Xinjiang. This will help to ensure that UK businesses are not complicit in human rights violations. We are leading international efforts to hold China to account, and of course I would be delighted to meet with Rahima, the Uyghur lady whom my hon. Friend referred to.

Importantly, we will continue to work on this incredibly crucial issue alongside our international partners, pulling together, including making the statement that we did late last year alongside Germany and 38 other countries. We will work with the new US Administration, under President Biden. May I thank my hon. Friend again for bringing this incredibly powerful testimony to the House? Anybody who has seen the report by the BBC—I congratulate the BBC on producing it—cannot help but be moved and distressed by what are clearly evil acts.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): The Chinese Government's brutal campaign of oppression in Xinjiang is a scar on the conscience of the world. The Labour party stands shoulder to shoulder with the Uyghur people. We already know about the forced labour camps, and yesterday we heard utterly heartbreaking testimonies from Uyghur women who have been systematically

[Stephen Kinnock]

raped, sexually abused and tortured. This follows last summer's harrowing accounts from Uyghur women who are victims of forced sterilisation and forced intrauterine device insertion. The Chinese Government's own statistics show that birth rates in Xinjiang fell by a third in 2017-18—further evidence that what is happening may meet the international legal definition of genocide, which the new US Administration have already acknowledged.

Last month the Foreign Secretary rightly condemned the events in Xinjiang as

“barbarism we had hoped was lost to another era”—[*Official Report*, 12 January 2021; Vol. 687, c. 160.]

Surely the time for tangible action has now come. First, where on earth are the Magnitsky sanctions that the Opposition and Members across the House have been calling for since last June? The Foreign Secretary said that the body of evidence in Xinjiang is “large, diverse and growing”, and we know the names of the senior Chinese officials who are responsible for these atrocities. The US sanctioned them last summer. Who in Government is holding this up?

Secondly, 20% of the world's cotton comes from Xinjiang. We welcome the steps that the Government have taken to help UK business cease being complicit in forced labour, but they did not go far enough. Companies must be accountable, not simply transparent. Rather than tinkering around the edges of the Modern Slavery Act, will the Minister commit himself to bringing forward legislation that moves us to a system of mandatory due diligence?

Next Tuesday, when the Trade Bill returns, the House has the chance to send a united message to the world that genocide can never be met with indifference, impunity or inaction. This should not be a partisan issue. Given that it is a long-standing Government commitment that courts, not the Government, must rule on genocide, will the Minister join with us and colleagues across the House to give UK courts the powers to determine genocide and therefore prevent the UK from ever doing trade deals with genocidal states?

Nigel Adams: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his questions, which raised a number of issues. He mentioned the US announcement regarding genocide. It is worth pointing out that the US has a different process for determining genocide that is not linked to a court decision. With regard to sanctions, we have had targeted measures in response to this matter. On 12 January, the Foreign Secretary announced a series of robust actions to ensure that no companies profit from forced labour and we will target in a forensic way those companies that are doing so, whether deliberately or otherwise. Of course, we are carefully considering any further designations under our global human rights regime. We keep all evidence and potential listings under review.

Mr Speaker: Let us head south to the Chair of the Select Committee, Tom Tugendhat.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con) [V]: I very much welcome the urgent question from my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani). She is raising a central point on the humanity that we share with people around the world, including with citizens of China. I was very keen that the Government should

assist companies here, because we heard only yesterday that Manchester University is in partnership with the China Electronics Technology Group Corporation unaware of its connections with the surveillance state that is going on in Xinjiang. Will the Minister commit to helping British institutions, academics or, indeed, companies to make sure that they are not complicit with any genocidal regime or any autocratic state using data or technology that they have provided together to oppress people? Those institutions cannot always know such information themselves, but the Foreign Office can certainly assist them.

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend, the Chair of the Select Committee, is right to raise this matter, especially around academia. UK universities are open to the world and we warmly welcome overseas students, including, for example, from China, but we will not accept collaborations that compromise our national security. We do work with academia to make sure that any links are closely monitored—whether that is with students or foreign military organisations—and we also work with British companies over the measures that the Foreign Secretary announced in January.

Mr Speaker: We now head to SNP spokesman Alyn Smith.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP) [V]: The plight of the Uyghurs is a well-trodden path within the House, and evidence of the dreadful situation just keeps mounting. I really commend the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) for bringing this forward today, because it is important that we keep the matter very much on our radar. I do not regard the Minister as part of the problem here. We are all supportive of his efforts that are under way, but we would like to see more. I have three particular points. I have raised before the academic links that the Chinese state has with UK institutions. Much greater clarity is needed there. On EU co-ordination, there are measures within the EU-China trade deal that could be activated. Frankly, the EU could be a bit sharper in activating them over this to trigger a dispute resolution. The most fundamental thing that the UK Government could do is to change their face on the genocide amendment, which is before the other place in the Trade Bill. At a stroke, that would change how the UK does business on this and would be a really positive sign. The time for the Government to reverse their position on that is long overdue.

Nigel Adams: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his measured questions. On that last point, may I be absolutely clear that we understand fully the strength of feeling on this matter with regard to the Trade Bill? We agree that there must be enhanced scrutiny for Parliament on both the issue of genocide and also the Government's response to this most serious crime. As a result, the Government are looking to see how we can ensure that relevant debate and scrutiny can take place in Parliament in response to credible concerns about genocide. I know that Ministers have been reaching out to colleagues across the House in this regard. We want to work with Parliament to find a credible solution—a parliamentary solution—that is both robust and properly accountable to the House.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con) [V]: I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) on her question and

the BBC on its programme. A litany of terrible, terrible abuse—rape, mass internment, people going into concentration camps, people being sterilised, people being maltreated, abused and tortured—which sounds like something from 75 years ago, but it is not; it is today. With respect to the Minister, it is no good anymore coming to the Dispatch Box to say that he agrees with all this. Where are the Magnitsky sanctions on individuals? We have all the evidence necessary. Finally, why, oh why are the Government going out of their way to block this amendment that is coming back to the House of Commons, which will give the courts the power to decide that this is genocide? The Minister has just said in his statement that only the courts can say it is genocide, so let us stop this nonsense, please. Allow the amendment to go through and get the courts to make that decision. It will be a leading position from a British Government—that is the way to go.

Nigel Adams: I thank my right hon. Friend for his continued interest. I know how strongly he feels about the issue. Again, to be absolutely clear, we understand the strength of feeling, in particular around the Trade Bill, and we believe that there must be more enhanced scrutiny by Parliament of genocide and our response to the crime. That is why we will work with him and other right hon. and hon. Members in that regard.

As we have said, competent courts include international ones, such as the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice, and national criminal courts that meet international standards of due process. On sanctions, we have already come up with targeted measures in respect of UK supply chains. Those are direct actions. Nobody should be any doubt. We are being very clear in our public statements about what is going on in Xinjiang. As I have said, we are carefully considering further designations.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD) [V]: I echo the words of the Minister in thanking the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) for obtaining this important urgent question. The best thanks that we could give to the hon. Lady and others in this House would be to actually act. What we saw on the programme was shocking, but it can no longer be any surprise. Nobody can say now that they do not know what is happening there.

The Minister has said it twice now: genocide is a matter for the courts, unlike in the United States. Surely the logic of his own arguments is that, when Lord Alton's amendment to the Trade Bill comes back to this House next week, the Government should be supporting it or, at the very least, finding a form of words that they will bring forward to achieve the same end. I am afraid that warm words and hand wringing are no longer enough.

Nigel Adams: The right hon. Gentleman always talks in a measured and passionate way about this issue. I reiterate the comments that I made earlier to the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock): the US has a different process for determining genocide, but it is not linked to a court decision. Our long-standing policy is that any judgment as to whether genocide has occurred is a matter for a competent court.

We are looking to work with right hon. and hon. colleagues to ensure that the relevant debate and scrutiny can take place here. That work has been going on while

the Bill has been in the other place. No doubt there will be further such conversations over the weekend as we lead up to the Bill coming back.

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) on securing the urgent question today. It is right to shine a light on the vile atrocities being carried out in Xinjiang. The official denials by the Chinese state today are a humiliation for China on the world stage. I, too, would welcome stronger Magnitsky-style sanctions against individual officials, but is not the bottom line that we have to face up to the fact that, when totalitarian regimes become established, there is a limit to what we can do from outside? Therefore, there is all the more moral responsibility on us to confront China's strategic aims in other parts of the world and to give support to Governments around the world who believe in democracy, freedom and the rule of law.

Nigel Adams: Again, my right hon. Friend is spot on. That is why the UK Government are leading international efforts in this regard to hold China to account. We led the first two joint statements at the UN on this issue at the Human Rights Council in June 2020 and at the Third Committee in October. The growing international pressure on China reflects the diplomatic leadership that the UK has been giving, not least in bringing together a total of 39 countries, alongside Germany, to express our concern at the situation in Xinjiang.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): As the case of the horrifying treatment of the Uyghur women outlined by the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) demonstrated very well, women and girls from marginalised religions or belief communities often encounter unique persecution and challenge due to their religion and gender. Other examples, such as the sexual violence suffered by Yazidi women and kidnapping and forced marriage of young Christian, Sikh and Hindu girls in Pakistan, like 14-year-old Maira Shahbaz and 13-year-old Arzoo Raja, serve to emphasise the scale and severity of this problem. What action are the Government taking to tackle issues at the intersection of gender violence, inequality and freedom of religion or belief violations?

Nigel Adams: The hon. Gentleman raises two or three horrific cases, and he is right to refer to the issue of sexual violence suffered by Yazidi women and young Christians, Sikhs and Hindus. We absolutely recognise that women and girls from religious minorities can often suffer because of their gender and faith. That is why we ensure that our human rights policy work considers the intersectionality of human rights—for example, the importance of addressing the specific issues that may be experienced by women from particular religious minority communities.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) on securing this urgent question. Many of my constituents are deeply concerned about the plight of the Uyghur community in China, and also the abuse, oppression and undermining of international agreements that is taking place in Hong Kong. What steps is my hon. Friend taking to support freedom of religion in China?

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend is, like the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), right to raise this issue. We are deeply concerned about the persecution of people because of their beliefs or their religion. The freedom to practice, change or share faith or belief without discrimination or opposition is a human right, and that is something that all people should enjoy. We are working very hard on this. The Prime Minister recently appointed my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) as special envoy on freedom of religion and belief. We work with and meet officials around the globe. Specifically, we met Chinese officials in 2019 and expressed our concerns, for example, on the pressures that Christians are facing. We raise cases directly. My ministerial colleague, Lord Ahmad, continues to work in this regard as the Minister responsible for human rights.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab) [V]: Will the Minister explain the Government's strategy for the G7 in Cornwall? The UK has the opportunity to work with its democratic allies to send a very strong message that China's treatment of the Uyghur women in Xinjiang is completely unacceptable to the international community. Does he agree that actions speak much louder than words?

Nigel Adams: The hon. Lady raises the G7 and the opportunity we have as chair this year, and she is right to do so; ensuring that multilateral fora are at the forefront of holding China to account is really important. As I have said many times at the Dispatch Box, we have raised the situation in Xinjiang many times. We work very closely with our international partners, and I am pretty confident she can rest assured that the issue we are discussing will be brought forward as a matter of urgency with our G7 colleagues.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con) [V]: It is more important than ever that we work with allies around the world to protect the values we share. What steps is my hon. Friend taking to co-ordinate with our Five Eyes partners, so that we can both monitor and combat China's clear human rights abuses?

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend talks about what we are doing internationally, which is really important. We have taken a leading international role, and the impact of our diplomacy is reflected in the growing number of countries that have joined our statements. We will continue to try to get the widest caucus of support, to ensure that measures brought forward hold China to account, as long as they are as effective as possible. We will continue to work with international partners, including Muslim and Arab countries and those in the region, as well as the traditional Five Eyes and European partners, to try to expand this caucus of like-minded states.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Given that the evidence of industrial-scale human rights abuse, including mass rape, torture and cultural genocide, is incontrovertible and known to the Chinese Government and the Chinese President, will the Government now give the UK courts the power to judge genocide; instruct our industries to ensure that we source our cotton not from the slave trade of Xinjiang but from democracies such as India; and instruct our pension funds and institutions not to invest in companies that are complicit in abuse, including surveillance companies? After all, our actions will be judged; our words will be ignored.

Nigel Adams: Again, I want to be absolutely clear: we are committed to ensuring that our trade policy is consistent with our international obligations. Trade does not have to come at the expense of human rights. That is why the Foreign Secretary announced further measures on 12 January. We will continue to work in this regard. Our long-standing position on determining genocide is that competent courts include international courts—the ICC and the ICJ—and national criminal courts that meet international standards of due process.

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con) [V]: I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) on securing this urgent question. The Minister may be aware that I am vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative. Does he agree that there is a need to set up a PSVI body to document crimes, support survivors and lead prosecutions and that China must allow such a body of independent observers unfettered access to Xinjiang—or East Turkestan, as it is also known—so that they can report on what is occurring there?

Nigel Adams: I thank my hon. Friend for the work that she does on the preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative APPG, and I would like to wish her a happy birthday. We have made it clear that the UN human rights commissioner or another independent fact-finding body must be given unfettered access to Xinjiang. We have called for that repeatedly in joint statements and national statements at the UN. It is vital that China allows such access without delay. If, as China claims today, these allegations are mere fabrications or fake news, how can it object to granting access?

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) for securing this urgent question.

In 2018, some 80% of all inter-uterine devices used in China were implanted in women in Xinjiang province, even though they account for only 1.8% of China's population. Forced sterilisation, rape, sexual torture and violence are happening before our eyes and are clearly documented. We know we are not the only nation that is trying to speak up on this issue. The Minister has talked about the importance of human rights access; will he update us on the conversations he has been having with the Australians, who have also been leading on this issue at the UN, in order that we can show the world a joint economic and diplomatic approach to holding China to account?

Nigel Adams: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that we need to co-operate on an international level, and we are. I had a meeting yesterday with the Australian deputy high commissioner and we discussed Xinjiang. It is crucial that we work together in all sorts of different multilateral fora and bilaterally with like-minded countries. As I have said previously, the impact of our diplomacy is reflected in the growing number of countries that have joined us in our statements.

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con) [V]: I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) on securing this question. The BBC programme was indeed harrowing, and many Carshalton and Wallington residents have raised it with

me. One of the most distressing aspects of the treatment of the Uyghurs is the sickening online propaganda suggesting that they are somehow happy with or, indeed, responding well to their so-called re-education. Will my hon. Friend the Minister outline what conversations he has had with his colleagues in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and in tech about tackling this harmful online content?

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this issue. Content that denies that these atrocities are going on should be judged as harmful content. We are developing an online harms regulatory framework, which will establish a new duty of care to ensure that companies have processes in place to deal with the sort of disinformation and harmful content to which my hon. Friend refers.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP) [V]: The public are truly appalled by the further horrific crimes that have now come to light. We cannot allow this situation to be tolerated. Will the Minister advise us on what more can be done to tighten the restrictions to prevent Xinjiang cotton and other goods manufactured by prisoners from entering UK supply chains and ending up in our shops?

Nigel Adams: The hon. Gentleman is correct to raise this issue; it is important that we take action in this regard. We believe that the measures announced by the Foreign Secretary in January are robust. We have led the international action in this regard. The measures in respect of UK supply chains are targeted and will help to ensure that no British organisation, whether in the public or private sector, is complicit in human rights violations in Xinjiang.

Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con) [V]: I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

We all agree that nobody should profit from the abuse of others. Forced labour is a hideous crime. I welcome what the Minister has said regarding the use of the Modern Slavery Act, but will he consider introducing provisions similar to those used in the United States, where hot goods produced by forced labour are prevented from even entering the country, to stop perpetrators profiting from their abusive behaviour?

Nigel Adams: I thank my right hon. Friend for the work she did when she was the Minister responsible for the Modern Slavery Act; it has had a huge impact. In respect of the US Department of Labour's hot goods provision, we certainly do not rule out taking further measures. Xinjiang's position in the international supply chain network means that there is a risk of businesses inadvertently or otherwise sourcing from suppliers that are complicit in the use of forced labour. That is why we have announced the package of measures to ensure that businesses that profit from forced Uyghur labour are not part of the supply chains. It includes the introduction of financial penalties for businesses that do not comply with the Modern Slavery Act and guidance for businesses operating in Xinjiang, and also support for UK Government and public bodies to exclude suppliers who are complicit in forced labour.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab) [V]: We have heard of the Chinese regime carrying out forced sterilisations on Uyghur women as well as carrying out forced abortions and tearing children from their mothers. As if it could not get any worse, we now know they are systematically raping and torturing women in their detention camps; nowhere is safe for them. As we approach the next stage of the Trade Bill, now is the time for the Government to accept Lord Alton's amendment to finally call this programme of abuse what it is: genocide. If the Minister's Department continues to refuse, what exactly is it waiting for China to do before it takes this action?

Nigel Adams: The hon. Lady is right to raise the deeply disturbing reports of forced sterilisation; we had a debate in this place late last year on the issue. It adds to the growing body of evidence about the disturbing situation that Uyghurs in Xinjiang and other minorities are facing. I can assure the hon. Lady that the Government fully understand the strength of feeling on this matter; that is why we are looking to work to ensure that the relevant debate and scrutiny can take place in Parliament, where there are credible concerns about genocide in defined circumstances.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con) [V]: The news from Xinjiang becomes ever more horrific, so what can the Government do to help us as consumers know when we shop online exactly where our products are coming from? Are the Government having conversations with the big online retailers so that we will know if anything we are buying is coming from either Xinjiang or China? Can the Government help in this area so our collective power as consumers can be brought to bear?

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend is right to raise that point. It is important that we strengthen the measures that we announced previously on the Modern Slavery Act and that we announced in January on strengthening the overseas business risk measures, making it clear to businesses, whether online or otherwise, that if they are investing or have supply chains in Xinjiang they must not inadvertently or directly be complicit in the exploitation of forced labour. We are reviewing the export controls to ensure that we are doing everything we can to prevent the export of goods that may contribute to human rights violations, and, as I mentioned to the hon. Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby), the financial penalties for organisations that fail to comply with these transparency obligations will be severe.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab) [V]: I am grateful to the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) for seeking this urgent question. I have a simple question that has been asked several times already this morning, but as I have not heard a clear answer I will ask it again: why do the Government continue to drag their feet on applying Magnitsky sanctions to Chinese officials in Xinjiang when the evidence of serious human rights violations is so compelling?

Nigel Adams: We have taken action. We have led international action; we have targeted measures, as announced in January; we will continue to work closely with our partners and lead international efforts to hold China to account, including by working with the new Administration in the United States; and I can tell the

[*Nigel Adams*]

hon. Lady we are carefully considering further Magnitsky designations on the Chinese regime and keeping all the evidence and the potential listings under close review.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The treatment of the Uyghurs by the Chinese regime is beyond appalling. The Minister was right to say in his statement that the initial step we need to take to resolve the situation is for the Chinese to allow unfettered access for the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. What possible excuse could the Chinese regime have for preventing that, and how are Her Majesty's Government going to bring that about?

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend makes a very valid point. If China has nothing to hide and claims again today that these allegations are false, there is absolutely no excuse for unfettered access not being granted to the UN human rights commissioner, and we have constantly called for that to happen.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) on securing this urgent question, but it is the third urgent question we have had on the treatment of Uyghurs, and indeed the Foreign Secretary made a statement on the issue not three weeks ago. I reiterate the comment by my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) that thoughts and prayers are no longer sufficient. What else do the Government and their international partners require to take action?

Nigel Adams: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. We are taking action. We have taken action with regard to Xinjiang. We have raised this directly with the Chinese authorities; the Foreign Secretary has raised it with his direct counterpart, and I have raised it with China's ambassador—now the former ambassador—to the UK. We announced a series of measures in January, and we funded the research that helped build the evidence base for what is going on in Xinjiang. We will continue to work not just on our own but with our international partners to ensure that China is held to its international obligations.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con) [V]: First, I thank the Minister for his work. He is a good Minister; it is a difficult brief, and he does his job diligently. However, does the Foreign Office believe that it is ethically right to sign preferential treaties with states credibly accused of genocide? Systematic rape, sexual torture, forced sterilisation, re-education camps, forced labour, Orwellian surveillance—this is a tragedy happening in our time and it demands moral recognition, so why are the Government blocking our meaningful genocide amendment to the Trade Bill? Will they please work with us to introduce a meaningful amendment to that Bill that recognises the criticality—the moral imperative—of recognising genocide, and a genocide that is happening now, in our age?

Nigel Adams: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments; I knew there was going to be a “however” or a “but” at some point. I know how passionate he is about this issue. To his first question, of course it is not right that we should be entering into these agreements with genocidal countries. I can again be absolutely clear that we understand

the strength of his feeling on this matter, and that of other hon. and right hon. Members. We want to work, and we are working, with hon. and right hon. Members right across the House—work that will continue in the run-up to next Tuesday, when the Bill comes back to this place.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP) [V]: The extent of these crimes of sexual violence can only be considered to be systematic and a further symptom of the genocide being carried out, using a whole armoury of appalling tactics, by Chinese officials. Can the Minister tell us whether the Government are considering adopting an atrocity prevention strategy to ensure that the resources of all Departments always operate in a way that is consistent with our values?

Nigel Adams: We are working incredibly hard with our international partners to ensure that there is an effective response to the situation in Xinjiang. The hon. Gentleman raises a very good point. We will continue to do that. I do believe that our diplomatic pressure is having an international impact, by virtue of the fact that the most recent statement had 38 countries joining us. We will continue to work both directly—bilaterally—and internationally to ensure that China is held to account for its international obligations.

Imran Ahmad Khan (Wakefield) (Con) [V]: Like my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani), I was appalled by the statement from the Chinese embassy condemning the BBC report about the treatment of Uyghurs, including the systematic rape of detained women, as little more than fake news. This is another example of the Chinese state denying genocide, despite it being glaringly obvious that the Chinese Communist party is orchestrating the systematic eradication of the Uyghur.

Unlike some today, I believe that whether a totalitarian state is established or not, we must have the courage and confidence to resist inhuman despotism, as this country proudly has in the past. Will my hon. Friend tell me when and which additional measures the Government intend to employ in the light of the overwhelming and still growing mountain of evidence of human rights abuses and shameless lies by the Chinese Government?

Nigel Adams: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Again, I know how passionate hon and right hon. Members feel about this particular issue. With regard to the measures, we have taken action, as he knows, both at the UN and with our statements bringing together our international partners. We announced further measures in January aimed at targeting companies that are potentially indirectly or inadvertently profiting from forced labour. We will continue to look and to lead international efforts to hold China to account. We will consider carefully further designations under our global human rights regime, and we will keep all evidence and potential listings under close review. It is important that sanctions are developed responsibly, and it is not appropriate to speculate on who may be designated in the future.

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

11.21 am

Sitting suspended.

Speaker's Statement

10.25 am

Mr Speaker: Before I call the shadow Leader of the House to ask the business question, I want to make a short statement about changes to the timings of Divisions. These changes will come into effect on Monday and reflect the fact that a large number of Members currently hold proxy votes. For the first Division, the doors will be locked after eight minutes, as normal. For any successive Divisions on the same business, the doors will be locked after five minutes. If there are Divisions later in the day, then again the doors will be locked after eight minutes for the first Division and after five minutes for any successive Divisions. If there is any problem, more time can be allowed before the doors are locked. I hope these changes will help us speed up our processes, without disadvantaging Members—we hope it will be to their benefit.

Business of the House

11.25 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): The business for the week commencing 8 February will include:

MONDAY 8 FEBRUARY—Second Reading of the Armed Forces Bill, followed by a motion to approve the draft Armed Forces Act (Continuation) Order 2021.

TUESDAY 9 FEBRUARY—A motion to approve the draft Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order 2021, followed by a motion to approve the draft Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order 2021, followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Trade Bill, followed by a general debate relating to the publication of the integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy. The subject for this debate was recommended by the Backbench Business Committee.

WEDNESDAY 10 FEBRUARY—Motions relating to the police grant and local government finance reports.

THURSDAY 11 FEBRUARY—Consideration of a Business of the House motion, followed by all stages of the Ministerial and Other Maternity Allowances Bill.

FRIDAY 12 FEBRUARY—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 22 February will include:

MONDAY 22 FEBRUARY—A general debate on covid-19.

TUESDAY 23 FEBRUARY—Opposition day (17th allotted day). There will be a debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition. Subject to be announced.

WEDNESDAY 24 FEBRUARY—Consideration of Lords amendments.

THURSDAY 25 FEBRUARY—A general debate on the proposal for a national education route map for schools and colleges in response to the covid-19 outbreak, followed by general debate on Welsh affairs. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 26 FEBRUARY—The House will not be sitting.

Valerie Vaz: May I start by thanking the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) for all his work? We now know that the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) will be taking over for him, and I thank the hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) for standing in for him today.

I thank the Leader of the House for the business. Of course, we say thank you for the Opposition day, but the Government have abstained on the past six Opposition motions in a row. Even though they have been passed by the House, the Leader of the House and the Government seem to be ignoring the will of Parliament and indeed the sovereignty of Parliament; he will know that the Executive derive their authority from Parliament.

I do not know whether the Leader of the House has read Lord McFall's account of reforming the Select Committee in the other place in *The House* magazine, but I can tell him that the Lords is to have a European affairs Committee and a sub-Committee on the Northern Ireland protocol. The Northern Ireland Secretary told the House of Commons Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs on 20 January that

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

[Valerie Vaz]

However, on Tuesday, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster called for an extension of the grace period, which is due to expire in March. The Prime Minister has previously said that he has concerns about the protocol and that there were teething problems, but the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster said he would “not describe” them in that way. It sounds as though the Government are in disarray. Let us recall the Prime Minister’s election promise to businesses in Northern Ireland:

“No forms, no checks, no barriers of any kind. You will have unfettered access.”

Will the Leader of the House look at restoring our Select Committee along the same lines as what they have in the other place—unless the Leader of the House thinks that there is more accountability there than we have in this place?

Yesterday, the Prime Minister said that the Health Secretary will update the House on the Government’s failure of a policy on comprehensive quarantine. When are we likely to expect that—or did the Prime Minister misspeak again? The Leader of the House will know that the Road Haulage Association has said that 40% to 50% of trucks are going back to the EU empty. The Federation of Small Businesses has called for transition payments. They are saying the problems have not emerged because of stockpiling, but the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster is now having weekly meetings of the Brexit taskforce. How about a weekly update to the House? Our businesses in our constituencies are part of the supply chain, and they want to know what is going on.

More broken promises, Mr Speaker, and more hypocrisy. The 2019 Tory manifesto pledged to “safeguard our green spaces”, but we have allotments being built on and sold off in Walsall. Two hundred and fifty residents are on the waiting list. The Tory-led council has agreed permission for 15 new townhouses on one of the two green public spaces in Walsall town centre, with no consultation with residents on a house in multiple occupation in a built-up area in Redhouse Street, and no consultation on using up a green space—again, in a built-up area—for a Traveller site. The current mayor is looking to Sandwell about green spaces, yet he is not looking to Tory-led Walsall Council and how it is using up every single green space. Could we have a debate on local councils and the lack of scrutiny?

The Leader of the House did not announce Foreign Office questions, but he will know the major incidents that are taking place around the world. He will also know that this House has supported Burma in setting up its democracy by building a library and training its MPs. The leader of Burma is in jail—the Proud Boys seem to be the same as the generals. Kameel Ahmady has escaped from Iran. Again, I raise Nazanin and Anoosheh: it is not public speculation, but parliamentary scrutiny. The Foreign Secretary’s American counterpart, Secretary of State Blinken, has spoken to all the families of those hostages. Will the Leader of the House undertake that the Foreign Secretary will do the same? My constituents are distraught at the sight of farmers—their extended families—being tear-gassed in their peaceful demonstration, so could we have a debate on foreign policy?

Today is World Cancer Day, and I am sure there is not a single person who does not know of someone who has suffered. We send our condolences to the family of Captain Tom Moore. He wanted us to remember how lucky we were to have an NHS, because he remembered when it was not there. Clapping is not enough: the Prime Minister can do something, which is make a payment to all our frontline services and NHS workers now that the Budget is coming up. We also pay tribute to Maureen Colquhoun. It is absolutely amazing that, in her five years, she managed to do so much. Perhaps the intranet and digital services can pay tribute to the work she has done, given that it is LGBT+ History Month.

I wish our hard-working shadow vaccine Minister, who is coming in later, a very happy birthday. Finally, welcome to the world, Henry George Elmore-Sedgebeer, who was born on 28 January.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Indeed: welcome to the world, Henry. There is a great joy in new life, and we must also celebrate the life of Captain Sir Tom Moore, who was an inspiration to so many people in this country. I am glad that the right hon. Lady mentioned World Cancer Day. Macmillan Cancer Support provides hotline services for those who need help and support, and I encourage people to use them if they need support. People should go to the doctor if they have any symptoms they are concerned about.

I also thank the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) for his participation in these exchanges, and for the exceptionally courteous dealings that I always had with him privately. Our public dealings may have been occasionally rambunctious, but privately, the dealings were extremely civilised. I welcome back the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), and express my gratitude to the hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) for standing in for him at short notice today. He is a very distinguished member of the Select Committee on Procedure, and asks me difficult questions there; I hope he will ask me easier questions in a moment’s time. [Interruption.] The right hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) says not—oh, dear. We shall wait and see.

Let me come to the right hon. Lady’s key points. First, the Government have made Opposition days available in the proper course of events, in accordance with Standing Orders, and the Opposition have brought forward important matters to debate. They have been debated, and the Government have set out their view during these debates. However, she knows that there are different functions within this House and different motions that have different effects, and motions that are passed by the House on Opposition days are not the law. They are different from the legislative processes that we have and are therefore treated in a different way. The reason that the Government, under Standing Order No. 14, have the right to order business in this House is because they command a majority. It is always open to the Opposition to ask for a vote of no confidence or to use an Opposition day for that, but I do not think that it would get them very far, so I think the House is being treated courteously, in accordance with the constitutional norms.

As regards various Select Committees, there are Select Committees that can look into all the matters relating to our departure from the European Union. It is the

general position of this Government and predecessor Governments that, by and large, Select Committees should reflect the Departments that they cover. Anything relating to Northern Ireland can be looked at by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, which is so wonderfully chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare)—one of my oldest friends in the House—who does it with great distinction and can carry out any inquiries that that Committee sees fit. There are plenty of opportunities for scrutiny, as there are of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, who has been the most assiduous appearer at this Dispatch Box to set out what the Government have been doing. There will be a statement later on the vaccine, but he has been second to none in his courtesy to the House and his frequency of appearances, so I think criticising him is, dare I say it, a bit unreasonable.

I think the right hon. Lady showed her characteristic courage in suggesting that the Prime Minister may have misspoken the day after the Leader of the Opposition had to make a rather embarrassing public admission of having misspoken in this Chamber, when he forgot what he had said previously. I was not going to raise this private embarrassment for the socialists until she said that the Prime Minister had done this, which he has not. He has been completely accurate in what he said, but the Leader of the Opposition—oh dear, oh dear, oh dear. It was rather awkward yesterday, and who knows what was going on behind the Speaker's Chair later on? *[Interruption.]* Oh, it was the other end, was it? They kept safely away from Mr Speaker. If you were to read the MailOnline, it was a very interesting state of affairs to have going on in this House of Commons.

The right hon. Lady raises her wonderful local council, Walsall Council, brilliantly run by the Conservatives, whom I had the pleasure of visiting last year. They are doing amazing work in developing brownfield sites, which is of fundamental importance. It is a great local authority and I hope that, when it has the local elections, everybody in Walsall will vote Conservative, because that is how they get good local government.

The right hon. Lady is right to raise foreign affairs. As she will have noticed, we are having a Back-Bench debate on 9 February—the general debate relating to the publication of the integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy—but we must encourage countries around the world to respect democracy. What has been going on in Burma is deeply shocking, and the Government are working with other countries to try to pressurise those who have done wrong to do right. That is what this Government must continue to do. They have been doing the same in relation to other countries where there are these abuses.

Once again, the right hon. Lady raises the dual nationals who are held improperly by Iran, and I will, as always, take this up with the Foreign Secretary on her behalf. It is a matter of the greatest importance, and a primary duty of the British state is to defend the interests of its nationals abroad.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Con): I start by echoing the comments from both Front Benchers in regards to Captain Sir Tom Moore. This week is Children's Mental Health Week. With the closure of schools and the impact of the pandemic on all children, it is more important than ever that we consider this particular

issue. I commend the work that the Government have been doing, in particular, with the Department for Education on the catch-up programme to help to tackle the attainment gap. However, mental health issues are becoming more prevalent across the country. Can I ask my right hon. Friend for a debate or a statement on the effects of the pandemic on children's mental health and what we can do to tackle this issue?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who raises an issue that has I think been raised with all of us in our constituencies. Children's Mental Health Week is an opportunity to keep raising awareness about the importance of looking after our mental health. The Prime Minister announced a new youth mental health ambassador, Dr Alex George, who will be working with the Government to promote the importance of mental health education and support in our schools to help young people to build resilience. We are making sure that support is available for any children who may be struggling with their mental health currently. Schools have the flexibility to offer a place in the school to vulnerable children, which might include those for whom being in school helps them to manage their mental health. Schools will continue to offer pastoral support to pupils working remotely, supported by £8 billion of taxpayers' money that the Government are providing for wellbeing, training and advice. There is also the increase in public expenditure on mental health to help to support many hundreds of thousands more children and adults who have mental health problems. I can also tell my hon. Friend that there will be an opportunity to debate this issue relating to covid on 22 February.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): I thank the shadow Leader and the Leader of the House for their kind comments about my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard). I know he certainly enjoyed his exchanges in these sessions, and I am sure the Leader of the House will be looking forward to the return of my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart). I am hoping that this transition period is slightly smoother than the Brexit one.

The Oxford Internet Institute recently published a report on industrialised disinformation. Given the importance that I know the Leader of the House places on confidence in democracy, he will I am sure be worried at the report's finding that

“industrialized disinformation has become more professionalized, and produced on a large scale by major governments, political parties, and public relations firms”,

and that the UK is listed among the 81 countries in which this is a permanent situation. Can we have a debate in Government time on how we can tackle and regulate this issue, as a number of firms are springing up—65, in fact—offering this service to clients?

Yesterday, I tried to seek an assurance from the Secretary of State for Wales on the financial powers for devolved nations in tackling the pandemic and, looking forward, tackling climate change. As part of that, I was looking to see why the Treasury continues to impose unfair and unreasonable limits on the devolved nations' borrowing powers. I would be very grateful if we could have a debate in Government time to further consider what steps we could take to consider those implications

[Owen Thompson]

and their impact on the devolved nations, and to untie the hands of the devolved nations so that we can tackle all the challenges that face us.

With sitting Fridays currently suspended, I am sure the Leader of the House will be keen to look at the number of private Members' Bills there currently are and to consider which could be brought forward, perhaps in Government time, or adopted by the Government. I might even take this opportunity to make a plug for my Ministerial Interests (Emergency Powers) Bill, which I am sure the Leader of the House would be keen to see adopted, as it would further ensure confidence among Members.

Finally, as well as being World Cancer Day, today is Time to Talk Day. To support the hon. Member for Bury South (Christian Wakeford), I ask the Leader of the House whether he will join MYPAS—the Midlothian Young Peoples Advice Service—in my Midlothian constituency, which, among others, is having conversations about mental health with so many. This is such a challenging time that these conversations are so important.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for telling the House that today is Time to Talk Day. This is a really important thing to do; we should all try to do more of it. I commend him for what he is doing in his constituency. If he wanted me to talk to his constituents, although I am not sure they want to hear from me, I would be honoured to do so. This is a very important initiative.

On the question of industrialised disinformation, I think that people are wise enough to know which sources of information are reliable and that people—our voters—understand that much of the information on the internet cannot be accepted at face value. However, sometimes it goes further than that, and it is right that the Government will bring forward proposals in the online harms Bill in due course to try to ensure that the internet is properly regulated. The question of whether the internet companies are in fact publishers is a very important one to bear in mind. They seem to have many of the aspects of publishers, though they are keen to avoid any of the responsibilities of publishers.

I am extremely keen to find a way of bringing private Members' Bills back before the end of this Session, whenever that may come. They are an important way in which Back Benchers raise issues of concern to their constituents and have them debated. I gave the commitment to bring them back as soon as is possible and practicable. That remains the case, and I am working with people throughout the House to try to find suitable time to do that, but I cannot give a date at the moment.

On the most contentious matter that the hon. Gentleman mentions—the fiscal arrangements—it is worth reminding him that £8.6 billion of UK taxpayers' money has gone to help Scotland during the pandemic. It is the strength of the United Kingdom that, throughout this pandemic, has provided the support needed. He may chunter behind his elegant mask, but that means 779,500 jobs in the furlough scheme. It means £1.13 billion in the self-employed scheme. It is a really important Unionist level of support. We know now that the Unionist Government are helping the devolved Scottish Government to roll out their vaccine programme, and more people will be going from the

British Army to help set up more vaccine centres. This is our UK Government bailing out a devolved Government. That is what we do, and we should be really proud of the United Kingdom, which has such strength as one country.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con) [V]: In 2018, a terrorist plot would have meant that Members of Parliament from a UK cross-party delegation and from around the world who were attending the free Iran rally were murdered. Fortunately, the French and Belgian police co-operated, and the plot was foiled. This morning, the Belgian court announced its verdict, and the Iranian diplomat Assadolah Assadi was convicted and sentenced to 20 years in prison, together with his accomplices. That has severe implications for our relations with Iran and for Iranian diplomatic services across the world. Will my right hon. Friend ask the Foreign Secretary to come to the House and make a statement on the implications of this verdict for diplomatic relations with Iran and its embassies not only in the UK but across Europe?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is right to raise this matter. Her Majesty's Government are deeply concerned about this incident and continue to work closely with our European partners on security and counter-terrorism issues. We are closely monitoring reporting on the trial taking place in Belgium. We expect diplomatic and consular missions in the UK to respect our laws and regulations in line with their obligations under the Vienna convention on diplomatic relations, the Vienna convention on consular relations and UK law. Who in this House can forget the murder of PC Yvonne Fletcher by somebody with diplomatic immunity from Libya? Only the worst states abuse diplomatic immunity to plot acts of terror. The Iranians surely do not want to put themselves in the same category—the same class—as Mr Gaddafi's regime.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab) [V]: I thank the Leader of the House for the business programme. It is obviously regrettable, from the Backbench Business Committee's perspective, that we have lost the previously proposed time on 11 February, but I thank him for the time now proposed on Tuesday 9 February. Could we have three hours' protected time for that general debate on 9 February relating to the publication of the integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy, to make sure that it gets a good airing?

On 25 February, we propose debates on a national route map out of the pandemic for schools and colleges, and a Welsh affairs debate to coincide with a date as close as possible to St David's day on 1 March, which is the following Monday. We propose those debates on 25 February as we are highly unlikely to get any time the following week, due to the probability that the Budget and the Budget debate will take place during that week. Both the debates we have proposed for 25 February are very well subscribed, so can we have as little additional business as possible from the Government and from yourself, Mr Speaker, to give as much time as possible for those debates to be aired properly?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I had a feeling that the hon. Gentleman would ask for protected time on 9 February, and I will certainly consider it. However, he has asked me on previous occasions whether the Government would be willing to schedule Backbench Business time when

Government business may fall short. If we then made that protected time, that of course would extend the day, which is a different request from the Backbench Business Committee. I am saying as gently as I can that the hon. Gentleman cannot have it both ways, but I will think about it next week, because the Government changed business from the Thursday to the Wednesday due to the important Bill on the Thursday.

As regards 25 February, Mr Speaker, you and I did what we could to protect time for the Holocaust memorial debate. That has to be exceptional. There are important statements and urgent questions on Thursdays as there are on other days. Although there is a gentlemen's agreement on Opposition days—[*Interruption.*] A gentlemen's agreement is an inclusive term!

Valerie Vaz: No, it's not!

Mr Rees-Mogg: Yes, it is. Although there is such an agreement on Opposition days, that cannot be extended to all days, otherwise we would lose time for important statements and urgent questions.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con) [V]: Once again, homes and businesses in the northern part of my constituency, particularly the area around Barrow Haven, are threatened with flooding. Will my right hon. Friend arrange for a statement to update the House and my constituents on the Environment Agency's plans to alleviate flooding in that part of northern Lincolnshire?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend, as always, is a champion for his constituents to ensure that they are properly protected and looked after. The sympathies of the whole House go to those affected by flooding, and the Government are determined to tackle the risks. Flood defences will have £5.2 billion of taxpayers' money devoted to them over the next six years to protect 336,000 properties better than they are currently protected.

In Lincolnshire, there has been expenditure of £296.8 million on flood defences since 2010—which coincides with my hon. Friend becoming a Member of this House—providing better protection for around 77,500 homes. There is planned further expenditure of £57.8 million of taxpayers' money on flood defences for the period 2020–21, protecting around 22,800 homes. A great deal is being done, but none the less for those whose homes have been recently flooded there is no better compensation than one's sympathy and the hope that things can be done to stop it happening in future, because the pain and distress that they bear is considerable.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab) [V]: A constituent contacted my office in tears this week about the uncertainty of their immigration status. They have worked for years as a community carer for the elderly in Westminster, which has obviously become incredibly difficult over the past year. She waited two years before her initial application was refused, and she is distraught at the prospect of another lengthy wait. Please can we have an urgent debate on prioritising visa applications for healthcare and medical workers?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady will know that the immigration system is being updated to ensure that we have a fair points-based system to help people. If there

are individual constituency questions, they are best taken up directly with the Home Office, although if the hon. Lady is not getting answers as swiftly as she would like, I will certainly use my office to help her.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Now that Putin the poisoner has jailed Alexei Navalny for the "crime" of missing probation appointments while in a coma, may we have a statement about British policy towards Russia, so that the House can express its view on such issues as that outrage and the increasing reliance of our European friends and allies on Russian gas supplies through such follies as the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My right hon. Friend is so right to raise this important and disgraceful issue. The Government have called for the immediate and unconditional release of Mr Navalny. It is a completely perverse ruling. To say that somebody who has been the victim of an attempted murder, with a poison that is usually only available to state actors, has missed an appointment and therefore must go to prison is peculiar and unjust. It shows Russia is failing to meet the most basic commitments expected of any responsible member of the international community. Russia should fulfil its obligations under international law to investigate this despicable crime and explain how a chemical weapon came to be used on Russian soil.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP) [V]: [*Inaudible.*]

Mr Speaker: We cannot hear Chris Law. We will come back to him if we can.

Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con): I know we are all grateful, across this House and of course across the whole country, to the staff, teachers and everybody involved in keeping schools open over the pandemic for the children who need them most. Headteachers in Ousedale School and St Paul's Catholic School in Milton Keynes have received particularly glowing praise in my inbox recently, and I am sure everybody here will join me in congratulating them on the hard work they have done. Could my right hon. Friend arrange for a debate or a statement to inform the House on the efforts that are being made to recognise school staff, and the steps that are being taken to fully reopen schools as soon as it is safe to do so?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for paying tribute to the Ousedale sixth form and St Paul's Catholic School in his constituency. That is one way, and an important way, of recognising the contribution that people are making during the current pandemic in the education system.

We will return to face-to-face learning as soon as we possibly can, which the Government hope will start from Monday 8 March. However, before we increase attendance, we need to be confident that doing so will not increase the pressure on the NHS—not because schools and colleges are no longer safe, but because that may increase the level of contact all of us have with other households. While we are seeing signs of things starting to move in the right direction, case rates remain high across the country and the NHS is still under immense pressure, so it is too early to set out a precise timetable, but I think everybody wishes to see schools reopen as soon as it is safe to do so.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD) [V]: The climate and ecological emergency has the potential of becoming an even bigger crisis than the global pandemic. Countries across the world, including the UK, were woefully under-prepared for the global pandemic, despite many warnings. Here in the UK, we do not even have a Department dedicated to working towards the enormous challenges of getting to net zero. In the year that the UK is hosting COP26, can we have not just one but several debates on how this Government are planning for and working towards getting to net zero by 2050?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady, my constituency neighbour, for her important question. The Government are committed to leaving the environment in a better state for the next generation. We cannot forget, after all, that it was Margaret Thatcher who led the world, with her foresight, in early efforts to tackle climate change in the late 1980s, and the Prime Minister aims to follow in her distinguished footsteps. This Government want to lead a green industrial revolution in the United Kingdom, levelling up the country, creating thousands of high-skilled green jobs and building back a greener economy, while helping to get to net zero by 2050.

The 10-point plan is the blueprint for a green industrial revolution. It combines ambitious policies with significant new public spending to deliver a vision for the United Kingdom as greener, more prosperous and at the forefront of the industries for the future. Spanning clean energy, buildings, transport, nature and innovative technologies, the plan will mobilise £12 billion of taxpayers' spending and will support up to a quarter of a million green jobs. This year, with COP26, as the hon. Lady says, and our chairmanship of the G7, we are going to be leading international efforts in this regard.

Mr Speaker: Let us try to return to Chris Law.

Chris Law [V]: The Perth Road Pub Company in my constituency has been using the furlough scheme since it was introduced last March. Despite Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs approving its claim in December, this was never received. HMRC claimed that it would take 15 days to resolve, but there has been no progress since. The company has been unable to make further claims and employees have lost out on income, with over 30 jobs now at risk. I have written to HMRC and will be writing to the Financial Secretary to the Treasury today. May we therefore have an urgent debate on HMRC's delays in investigating and resolving unpaid furlough claims?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman raises a really important point for his constituents. I would remind him that 779,500 jobs in Scotland have benefited from the furlough scheme. It has been a really important way of keeping people in employment, rather than having unemployment figures spiralling out of control. It has been a very effective scheme. However, as with any scheme, there are inevitably occasions when things do not work. I will undertake immediately after these exchanges to take up his point with ministerial people and ensure that the question about the pub in his constituency is resolved as swiftly as it may be. If he would like to send me a copy of his letter to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, I will ensure that my offices are used to pursue an answer for him.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): We are having difficulties connecting with Stroud, so we will instead go directly to Luton South.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab) [V]: Today is Time to Talk Day, which encourages everyone to be more open about their mental health. On that note, just a fortnight ago I met a number of leaseholders in Luton South who told me how the anxiety of living in an unsafe building, and the threat of having to pay for fire safety remediation that they simply cannot afford, is having a negative impact on their mental health. With the Prime Minister stating at Prime Minister's questions yesterday that no leaseholder should have to pay these costs, will the Leader of the House outline when the Fire Safety Bill will return to this place so that the Prime Minister can back up his words with action by supporting the amendments in the name of the Leader of the Opposition?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The Prime Minister indeed said that leaseholders ought to be protected from large costs, but the correct Bill for that will be the building safety Bill that the Government are bringing forward. The Fire Safety Bill is in its amending stages and will return to the Floor of the House in the normal way.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): Last week I joined my local antisocial behaviour team for a street patrol around central Blackpool, which has one of the highest drug-related death rates and crime rates in the entire nation. I am delighted that the Government are taking direct action in Blackpool through Project ADDER, which is an innovative approach, supported by millions of pounds of additional funding, to help dismantle organised criminal gangs and tackle the supply of drugs coming into Blackpool. Will my right hon. Friend therefore consider having a debate in Government time to further assess how we can relentlessly pursue criminal gangs and tackle the devastating impact that drug-related crime has upon many communities, including mine?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend raises an extremely serious issue. I am glad that his constituency is benefiting from the direct action that the Government are taking to help authorities tackle serious crime, and I commend him for joining the local street patrol to see at first hand the difficulties that his constituents face as a result of criminal and antisocial behaviour. As my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary set out in her statement on 20 January, the Government are providing £148 million of taxpayers' money to dismantle criminal gangs, tackle drug supply and support drug treatment services. As my hon. Friend mentioned, Project ADDER—it stands for addiction, diversion, disruption, enforcement and recovery—will trial a new approach to drug misuse, combining a targeted police approach with enhanced treatment services. It will run for three financial years in five areas—Blackpool, Hastings, Norwich, Middlesbrough and Swansea Bay. I encourage my hon. Friend to raise this further at Home Office questions on 8 February.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): We return to Stroud and Siobhan Baillie.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con) [V]: It was World Wetlands Day this week and also the 50th anniversary of the Ramsar convention on wetlands of international

importance. We have lost a third of the world's wetlands since 1970, but they are critical blue infrastructure. We have 175 internationally important Ramsar sites in the UK and they provide the ability to store carbon, reduce flooding, support wellbeing and restore biodiversity. I am working with the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust Slimbridge to promote wetlands and a blue recovery. Will my right hon. Friend consider a debate on the issue in Government time, because of the UK's clear focus on climate change and biodiversity?

Mr Rees-Mogg: That question was definitely worth waiting for, so I am glad that we persevered with the technology.

I commend my hon. Friend for her work with Slimbridge, which is such a wonderful place. As she said, World Wetlands Day took place this week and was an opportunity to remind everyone of the crucial ecosystem services that wetlands offer to people and nature. Wetlands ecosystems deliver vital services in the UK, including by providing habitats to protected species, improving our air and water quality and providing defences against flooding, as my hon. Friend rightly noted.

The United Kingdom recognises that wetlands, especially peatlands and coastal blue-carbon ecosystems, are an important and effective nature-based solution to tackle biodiversity loss and climate change. Since 1976, this country has worked alongside our international partners, under the Ramsar convention on wetlands, to promote the conservation and wise use of wetlands. With 175 designated wetlands throughout the UK and our overseas territories, the UK is proud to host the largest number of Ramsar sites in the world. We are doing our bit, but my hon. Friend encourages us to do more and is right to do so.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab) [V]: Yesterday, Dido Harding, the head of Test and Trace and a Conservative peer, defended there being 2,500 consultants working on test and trace who are paid an average of £1,100 a day. That is more than £2.5 million per day on private consultants. Surely the private sector should not be siphoning off public funds in this way, so will the Leader of the House make time for an urgent debate on how we can get rid of these rip-off companies from our test and trace system and instead invest the funds in our NHS?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am afraid to say that was a completely absurd question. The pressure on the NHS is being reduced because of the work of Test and Trace. We have the capacity to process more than 800,000 tests a day, and so far more than 20 million people in this country have been tested at least once. This is an essential part of how we are tackling the pandemic and the hon. Gentleman, as always, pooh-poohs it. Typical socialist: he pooh-poohs the private sector. Without the private sector, we would not be rolling out the vaccines as fast as we are—that is another key part of our defence and action against the pandemic. Yes, the NHS is a fundamental part of our healthcare—of course it is—but the vaccines were produced by and are being produced and manufactured by private companies. We should recognise the enormous contribution that free markets have made in helping us and not pooh-pooh them.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con) [V]: Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on planning issues? In Amber Valley we have an application for a solar farm

covering more than 300 acres, and although there is support for renewable energy there is not support for losing quite such a large area of countryside. It would be helpful to discuss the balance between the need for energy and the preservation of the open countryside in our constituencies.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Every Member of the House knows that we could spend every day of every week debating planning issues. They are fundamental to the representation that we provide to our constituents and are often the most contentious issues that arise. The Government set out a new White Paper on planning last year; the matter is being debated and very much thought about and will be an essential part of the Government's programme.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab) [V]: Yesterday, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) raised concerns on behalf of students affected by the pandemic, who include post-graduate researchers like my constituent Elliot Howley, who is studying for his PhD here in Nottingham. I regret that the Minister for Universities did not address the failure of UK Research and Innovation to provide funded extensions to those doctoral students who need them, despite its own survey last June in which 77% of non-final year students indicated that they would need an extension averaging 5.1 months. May we have a debate on the recommendation of the report by the all-party parliamentary group for students that studentships should be extended to allow research to be finished to the usual high standards in circumstances where lockdown has affected access to facilities and resources?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Universities have a great deal of autonomy over how they run their affairs and their courses, and that is quite right. The difficulty with extensions is the obvious one: the next year is coming and, if the choice is for an extension, where is the capacity? The hon. Lady may wish to raise the subject in an Adjournment debate.

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con) [V]: I was pleased to read in the *Financial Times* that the Government are rightly planning to relocate several of their Departments to the north of England, and yet I was disappointed not to see Doncaster on the list of places that are being considered. As my right hon. Friend will be aware, Doncaster and my constituency of Don Valley have some of the best transport links in the country, excellent housing stock and a town that could easily accommodate many civil servants. Does he not agree that the Government should therefore consider relocating at least one of their Departments to my fantastic town?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is the greatest salesman for Don Valley and Doncaster that one could imagine. His constituents should be so reassured to have him as their representative and champion. There is still somebody called the Queen's Champion—an hereditary post—who used to appear at coronations. My hon. Friend holds a similar role in being a champion for his constituency.

The Government are considering new locations for the civil service, and it is obviously important to find the sorts of locations that have excellent transport links and housing. The Cabinet Office, through the Places for

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

Growth programme, is finalising relocation plans and beginning their implementation following the spending review. We want to ensure that our geography of locations covers as large and representative an area of the UK as possible, with the aim of having decision makers based in locations to create and distribute opportunity, jobs and investment across the country, including Yorkshire.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP) [V]: By any objective assessment, the promises made to the people of Northern Ireland—that, as a result of the Northern Ireland protocol, their citizenship of the UK would not be diminished and their access to the GB market would not be disrupted—have been totally discredited. Tens of thousands of people cannot buy online from GB; horticultural supplies to gardeners and garden centres have almost stopped; businesses have found that they cannot get supplies, which has put in jeopardy their production; and petty EU rules have seen goods turned away at ports because they were not loaded on pallets acceptable to the EU, or machinery had soil residue on their tyres. All that is before full implementation of the protocol. The grace period ends in April, and what will happen after that—we have not yet even seen the impact of EU legislation being imposed undemocratically on Northern Ireland—is unthinkable. Will the Leader of the House consider a half-day Opposition day debate on those issues, which are of fundamental importance to the people of Northern Ireland, to the Union and to the integrity of the UK market, given that the Democratic Unionist party has not had an Opposition day debate in this Session?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Obviously, I listen very carefully to the right hon. Gentleman's request for an Opposition day debate. The DUP does not automatically have one, but I note that in the past it often has, so that will certainly be discussed in the normal manner.

As to the mainstay of his question, this is a matter of the greatest concern. Northern Ireland is a fundamental part of the United Kingdom. The agreement with the European Union was intended to respect that, and to respect the Belfast agreement—the Good Friday agreement—that sets out clearly that no change can be made to the status of Northern Ireland without the consent of both communities. Both my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster have been taking up these issues with urgency. The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster has been in touch with his opposite numbers in the European Union to see how things can be improved, and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has made it clear that there is no question but that we will ensure that steps are taken to safeguard the position of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom. I note that the actions of the European Union recently show that the threshold for article 16's use was perhaps not as high as we may previously have thought.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con) [V]: Captain Sir Tom Moore taught us that tomorrow is a good day. May I ask my right hon. Friend, as Lord President of the Privy Council, to use his influence to bring about a commemorative coin for this remarkable national treasure and a debate in this House?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My right hon. Friend has the most brilliantly obscure knowledge, because the approval of all coins does indeed come before the Privy Council on the suggestion of the Royal Mint. I hope that, as Lord President, I do see a proposal from the Royal Mint in due course. Captain Sir Tom Moore dedicated his life to serving his country and others, and he showed the value of all life when he, in his 100th and 101st years, showed that somebody of great age can make as important a contribution as anybody else in the country did over that past year, and it is a reminder to all of us of the value of life, and why it has been right to protect life as far as we possibly can during this incredibly difficult period.

“Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine:

et lux perpetua luceat eis.

Requiescat in pacem. Amen.”

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Amen.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP) [V]: On World Cancer Day, I am sure the Leader of the House will be aware that terminally ill people can only access fast-track benefits if they can prove that they have six months or less to live. In Scotland, a change in the law on benefits for terminally ill people is due to take place later this year, and in early 2022 will provide fast-track access to disability benefits. Will the Leader of the House make a statement, setting out his views as to whether he believes that this change should also apply to universal credit to avoid a two-tier system for those who struggle with a terminal illness, so that they can access the support they need from a more compassionate welfare system?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is always difficult dealing with benefits at the end of life because it is not a precise science as to when that will be. It is an estimate of the end of life, but it is important that all benefits should be handled sensitively with people who are coming to the end of their life. If a devolved authority has a better way of doing things, I am sure that the Government will study that. On the other hand, devolved authorities should be careful about changing things that lead to differences that may be confusing for people at the end of their life.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con) [V]: I have received emails from several constituents telling me of the increasing number of thefts of catalytic converters. Thieves simply cut the units from the exhaust pipe of a parked car and sell them on to scrap metal dealers. In December 2017, the Home Office published its review of the Scrap Metal Dealers Act 2013 and said that it would give further consideration to the case for strengthening the legislation in the future—in consultation with the industry, the police and interested parties. Can a Minister from the Department make a statement on this issue and update the legislation to make the second-hand sale of catalytic converters unlawful unless purchased from an accredited dealer?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend raises an important point. May I remind him that Home Office questions are coming up on Monday 8 February when it will be an opportunity to raise this further. The National Police Chiefs' Council hosted a problem-solving workshop in November to bring together representatives from the motor industry, police and the Government to discuss

what can be done to tackle the theft of catalytic converters, and the Government welcome that work. The Government are committed to providing funding to set up the national infrastructure crime reduction partnership to ensure national co-ordination of policing and law enforcement partners to tackle metal theft. It is an important question that my hon. Friend raises and one that the Government are looking at and I am sure that more proposals will be brought forward.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Can I ask the Leader of the House for some advice and help, as he has good experience in financial services? I hear this morning that LV= Liverpool Victoria, one of the oldest mutual societies in the country with 1.3 million members, is to be sold off for £530 million by an unscrupulous bunch of managers who have insinuated themselves into the mutual. The membership has not been properly consulted, and nobody can find out who will benefit from the £530 million sell-off. Can he advise me on how to get the Business Secretary and other Ministers into the House of Commons as early as possible, so that we can protect this wonderful 200-year-old mutual that employs 6,000 members of staff, some of whom are in my constituency? Can he help me with this?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I was worried for a moment that the hon. Gentleman would ask me for financial advice, which I would not be regulated to give. I was never regulated to give advice to private individuals, but I am able to give advice on how to raise things in the House of Commons, though I slightly feel it is like teaching one's grandmother to suck eggs when giving advice to such a distinguished and long-serving Member who knows perfectly well how to raise matters in the House. There are BEIS questions on 9 February, but the important issue he raises is one he may also want to take up with the Financial Conduct Authority, which is likely to be the relevant regulator.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con) [V]: Reports this week show a concerning rise in alcohol harm during the pandemic, including in death rates due to increased alcohol consumption. To help the many families sadly affected by this, can we have a debate on the need for sufficient addiction recovery programmes across the country to be available, on the benefits of reforming the alcohol duty system, and on the need for a revised Government alcohol strategy?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The Government share the concerns about reports of increases in alcohol-related deaths and we are monitoring the situation closely. It is worth bearing in mind that for the vast majority of the country, drinking alcohol is convivial, has been central to our social lives for centuries and enjoyable in moderation. As Winston Churchill said:

“I have taken more out of alcohol than alcohol has taken out of me.”

But for some families, a small minority, abuse of alcohol has been hugely damaging. This is a cross-cutting issue affecting several Government Departments, and there is a strong programme of work under way to address alcohol-related health harms and impacts on life chances, including an ambitious programme establishing specialist alcohol care teams in hospitals, and to support the children of alcohol-dependent parents. The Government

have committed to publish a new UK-wide cross-Government addiction strategy. This strategy will be informed by Dame Carol Black's continuing review of drugs, part 2 of which focuses on prevention, treatment and recovery. Taxpayers are providing £23 million funding this year for substance misuse treatment and recovery services for rough sleepers. This is a really difficult issue, because most people use alcohol well and enjoy it, but it is important to help and protect those who go to excess.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins), could the Leader of the House give some indication as to when the Fire Safety Bill will be coming back from the other place to this Chamber, in view of the fact that the Queen's Speech is not that far away and the Bill has to be back here in time to debate the relevant amendments, which were mentioned earlier?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman knows more about the date of the Queen's Speech than I think I do. I am not sure that any announcement has been made on that or any date confirmed, but he is clearly well informed. The Fire Safety Bill will come back in the normal course of events. Bills come through and back at a different pattern, depending on the nature of business and the urgency of the business that we have to deal with.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con) [V]: Will my right hon. Friend find time for a further debate on implementing the Government's strategy on obesity? Having this week chaired a forum on that very subject, it really was brought home to me that as much as we talk about this growing crisis, it would appear that there is still not enough joined-up action from the Departments that are involved in delivering the strategy.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I have been waiting for some months now for my hon. Friend to ask again about Southend becoming a city and whether there will be general celebration when that happens, but he keeps on delaying. We are expecting the seagulls in Southend to be taking over from the pigeons to bring us messages about city status for Southend. However, he raises a very important point. The coronavirus pandemic has thrown into light how urgent it is for us to reduce obesity, and it is one of the Prime Minister's personal priorities. We launched our strategy, “Tackling obesity: empowering adults and children to live healthier lives”, in July 2020. It sets out an overarching campaign to reduce obesity, taking forward actions from previous chapters of the childhood obesity plan, including the Government's ambition to halve the number of children living with obesity by 2030, and includes measures to get the nation fit and healthy to protect against covid-19 and help the NHS. Government Departments do work closely together on reducing obesity and share responsibility for delivering the measures set out in the obesity strategy. They are also working with councils to reduce child obesity locally through groundbreaking schemes. As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) about alcohol, there is the similar difficulty that the Government, in being prescriptive, may stop people doing things that do not do them any harm while also protecting people from harm. It is a matter of great deliberation to try to get this balance right.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP) [V]: Across our society, and particularly in universities and the third sector, women, and some men, are losing their jobs, and having their positions undermined and their personal safety put in jeopardy, simply for questioning the ideology that any man can self-identify as a woman, and for speaking up for women's sex-based rights under the Equality Act 2010. Does the Leader of the House agree that all democrats should condemn such attacks on free speech, and can we have a debate about free speech and the importance of sex as a protected characteristic under the Equality Act?

Mr Rees-Mogg: May I begin by saying how sorry I am that the right hon. and learned Lady has left the SNP Front Bench? That is not because I regularly agree with her, because I do not think that I do, but because she has made it clear that she is one of the most intelligent and careful scrutinisers of Government, not just on her party's Benches but in this House. When I was on the Brexit Committee with her, her analysis and her questioning were, I must admit, second to none. As I believe that good government depends on careful scrutiny, her removal from office is a loss to our democratic system. Dare I say, perhaps ungraciously, that Mona Lott is responsible for this and it may be for reasons of internal SNP politicking?

To come to the right hon. and learned Lady's point, free speech is fundamental, and it is disgraceful that she received threats for her views and her removal from office, to the extent where the police had to be involved. Every Member of this House should feel safe in whatever they say as long as it is within the law and is not effectively threatening violence. What is said in this House is of course completely protected. It is outrageous that she should have been placed in this position. Can I commit to supporting freedom of speech? Absolutely I can. That is what this place exists for; that is what underpins our democracy. Much as I disagree with her on so many things, may I commend her courage in standing up for freedom of speech and putting forward her views clearly in a difficult and sensitive area but one where she has a right to be heard?

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The Leader of the House mentioned the Queen's Champion. Actually, my right hon. Friend, with his style, would make a very good Queen's Champion, but unfortunately the post is held by the lord of the manor of Scrivelsby in the county of Lincolnshire. Can I suggest to him, though, that he becomes another champion—a champion for good value for money? Since the House voted by a very narrow margin to demolish a perfectly serviceable Richmond House and erect a temporary Chamber at vast cost, everything has changed. The country is broke and we have proved, have we not, that we can run Parliament virtually if we have to? So may we have an urgent debate on this matter, get on with the work, if necessary close Parliament down except virtually between July and October, and work in double-shifts and perhaps bring in Front-Bench spokesmen to a pop-up Parliament in the atrium of Portcullis House, but above all get on with the work and pursue value for money?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My right hon. Friend is right to say that the pandemic has increased the eternal need to ensure that when it comes to all Government expenditure,

but especially restoration and renewal, the taxpayer is only asked to pay for vital works, not gold-plating. I will confess to him that some of the figures I have heard bandied around for the total cost, and some I am seeing requested for budgets at the moment, are eye-watering, and it is hard to believe that that is what is required for the vital works.

The Palace of Westminster must remain the home of our democracy. It is a temple to democracy: that is what our Victorian forebears built it to be. It is one we should be immeasurably proud of and must preserve and use, because we need to carry on our work in this fantastic Palace, not somewhere else. But it has to be said that the "how" should follow the "what" in this regard, not the other way round: the "what" comes after we have worked out "how", which is why hon. and right hon. Members like my right hon. Friend will have such an important role to play in the coming months in helping to determine the scale of the project—the "what" that is required. We are the ones accountable to constituents, so it is quite right that we will be the Members of Parliament—the Members of this current Parliament—who make the final decisions on how to proceed.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Last month, post Brexit, I asked the House of Commons Commission to give preference to British suppliers. On 14 January it replied:

"The Public Contract Regulations 2015 are UK law and in general they prohibit contracting authorities from specifying the country of manufacture or origin when purchasing goods. This has not changed now that the Brexit transition period has ended."

But, as the explanatory memorandum at the time on this legislation made clear, this regulation was made to implement an EU directive, so may we have a debate to demand that our public sector backs British industry and British workers, or, better still, could the Leader of the House prevail on his colleagues to change this legislation ASAP?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Once again I welcome the right hon. Gentleman, who is such a staunch Brexiteer and who has seen the errors of the European ways and wishes the United Kingdom Parliament to make its own laws free of orders, requests, directives or regulations from the European Union. He is right, therefore, to campaign on this issue, because that is what this House is for: to make sure that we make our own laws. It does seem to me that the point the right hon. Gentleman makes is entirely reasonable: that the United Kingdom Parliament ought to be able to have its supplies entirely from the United Kingdom if that is what it wishes to do. I am not in favour of protectionism, but this Parliament is a symbol of the nation, and therefore I think he is on a very good wicket in what he says.

Dehenna Davison (Bishop Auckland) (Con) [V]: Last night, in a very rare occurrence, I took a leaf out of the book of the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) and asked local residents what they wanted me to ask the Leader of the House about. After some great suggestions, an issue raised multiple times was the Toft Hill bypass, a much needed bypass to the A68 that will help to alleviate traffic issues and greatly improve road safety near Toft Hill Primary School. In Transport questions last week, the Transport Secretary told me that he came armed with information about the Toft Hill bypass, but I threw him a curveball by asking

about a different local transport issue. However, knowing now how incredibly keen the Transport Secretary is on the future success of this bypass, will the Leader of the House ask him to meet me and local stakeholders to discuss how best to move the project forward?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I must confess I am surprised that my hon. Friend is modelling herself on the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), as I know something of her political views; I do not think hers and his particularly coincide. However, I congratulate her on holding her local authority to account in the Chamber and representing her constituents so vigorously.

The issue that my hon. Friend raises is one for Durham County Council to consider, as it is responsible for the road in question. As I understand it, no bid from the council has as yet been forthcoming. The Government cannot currently make guarantees, but the new £4 billion levelling-up fund may offer an opportunity to support this project if local leaders make a convincing case. Further details of that fund will be announced in due course. I view it as part of my role as Leader of the House to try to facilitate meetings between Members and Ministers, so I will of course pass on my hon. Friend's request to the Transport Secretary.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I will briefly suspend the House in order that preparations can be made in the Chamber for the next item of business.

12.35 pm

Sitting suspended.

Covid-19 Vaccine Update

12.39 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Nadhim Zahawi): With permission, I would like to make a statement on coronavirus, but before I do that I wish my shadow opposite number, the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris), a happy birthday.

Our nation is getting safer every day as more and more people get protected by the biggest immunisation programme in the history of our health service. More than 10 million people have now received their first dose of one of our coronavirus vaccines. That is almost one in five adults in the United Kingdom. We are vaccinating at scale, while at the same time retaining a close focus on the most vulnerable in our society to make sure those at greater need are at the front of the queue.

I am pleased to inform the House that in the UK we have now vaccinated almost nine in 10 over-80s, almost nine in 10 over-75s and more than half of people in their 70s. We have also visited every eligible care home possible with older residents in England and offered vaccinations to all their residents and staff. That means we are currently on track to meet our target of offering a vaccine to the four most vulnerable groups by mid-February.

That is an incredible effort that has drawn on the hard work of so many, and I want to just take a moment to thank every single person who has made this happen: the hundreds of thousands of volunteers up and down the country, the scientists, our colleagues in the NHS—the GPs, the doctors, the nurses and the vaccinators—those in social care, the manufacturers, the local authorities, the armed forces, the civil servants who work night and day to make this deployment possible, and anyone else who has played a part in this hugely logistical endeavour. It really is a combination of the best of the United Kingdom. At our time of national need, you have given us a big boost in our fight against this deadly virus, which remains a big threat to us all.

There are still more than 32,000 covid patients in hospital, and the level of infection is still alarmingly high, so we must all stay vigilant and keep our resolve while we keep expanding our vaccination programme, so that we can get more people protected even more quickly. We have an ambitious plan to do that. We are boosting our supply of vaccines and our portfolio now stands at more than 400 million doses, some of which will be manufactured in the United Kingdom, and we are opening more vaccination sites, too. I am pleased to inform the House that 39 new sites have opened their doors this week, along with 62 more pharmacy-led sites. That includes a church in Worcester, Selhurst Park—the home of Crystal Palace football club—and a fire station in Basingstoke, supported by firefighters and support staff from Hampshire Fire and Rescue Service.

One of the greatest pleasures for me over the past few months has been seeing the wide range of vaccination sites that have been set up right in the heart of our local communities. Cinemas, mosques, food courts and so many other institutions have now been transformed into life-saving facilities, giving hope to people every day. Thanks to that rapid expansion, we have now established major national infrastructure. There are now

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89 large vaccination centres and 194 sites run by high street pharmacies, along with 1,000 GP-led services and more than 250 hospital hubs. Today's announcement will mean that even more people will live close to a major vaccination site, so we can make vaccinating the most vulnerable even quicker and even simpler.

We have always believed in the power of science and ingenuity to get us through this crisis, and I was pleased earlier this week to see compelling findings in *The Lancet* medical journal, reinforcing the effectiveness of our Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine. It showed that the vaccine provides sustained protection of 76% during the 12-week interval between the first and second dose, and that the vaccine seems likely to reduce transmission to others by two thirds. That is really great news for us all, but we will not rest on our laurels.

No one is really safe until the whole world is safe. Our scientific pioneers will keep innovating, so that we can help the whole world in our collective fight against this virus. I saw how wonderful and powerful this ingenuity could be when I was one of thousands of volunteers who took part in the Novavax clinical trial, which published very promising results a few days ago. Today, I am pleased to announce another clinical trial—a world-first study that will help to cement the UK's position as a global hub for vaccination research. This trial will look at whether different vaccines can be safely used for a two-dose regime in the future to support a more flexible programme of immunisation. I want to reinforce that this is a year-long study, and there are no current plans to change our existing vaccination programme, which will continue to use the same doses. But it will perform a vital role, helping the world to understand whether different vaccines can be safely used. Our scientists have played a pivotal part in our response to this deadly virus, and once again they are leading the way, helping us to learn more about this virus and how we should respond.

It has been heart-warming to see how excited so many people have been to get their vaccine and to see the work taking place in local communities to encourage people to come forward to get their jab. Hon. Members have an important role to play too. I was heartened to see colleagues from both sides of the House coming together to encourage take-up within minority ethnic communities through two joint videos posted on social media last week. As the video rightly says, "MPs don't agree all the time, but on taking the vaccination, we do." I could not agree more, and I am grateful to every single Member who has come forward to support this national effort. We want to make it as easy as possible for colleagues to do so. This week, we published a new resource for Members that provides more information on the vaccine roll-out and what colleagues can do to increase the take-up of the vaccine in their constituencies. That is an extremely valuable resource, and I urge all Members to take a look at it and think about what they can do in their constituencies.

Our vaccination programme is our way out of this pandemic. Even though the programme is accelerating rapidly and, as the chief medical officer said yesterday, we appear to be past the peak, this remains a deadly virus, and it will take time for the impact of vaccinations to be felt. So for now, we must all stand firm and keep

following the steps that we know make a big difference until the science can make us safe. I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Happy birthday to the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris).

12.47 pm

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am grateful to the Minister for advance sight of his statement and for his kind words about my birthday. Of course, the gladdest tidings is the news that more than 10 million people have received their first dose. Once again, our incredible national health service has delivered for us. I visited a site in Nottingham earlier in the week, and that team of the NHS, armed forces, local councils, volunteers and many more coming together was an uplifting and incredible sight.

We welcome today's announcement about the new clinical trial. It is clear that we will live with covid-19 and its mutations for a long time, so this is the best way to get out in front of it. We were glad also to hear the study results regarding the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine reducing transmission and maintaining protection over 12 weeks. As the Minister said, it is clear that vaccines are the way out of this pandemic. Daily cases are beginning to fall, but it is vital that the Government do not repeat previous mistakes and take their foot off the gas just as things look to be getting better. Could the Minister update us on whether he expects similar trial data to be published for the Pfizer vaccine?

The Government seem to be on track to deliver on their promise of vaccinating the top four Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation priority groups by the middle of this month. We really welcome that, and I commend the Minister's work in that regard, but in a spirit of co-operation, I need to press him on a couple of points about what comes next.

First, regarding data, we are all concerned about the reports of lagging take-up among black, Asian and minority ethnic communities, as well as poorer communities, and I associate myself with the comments about the brilliant work done by our colleagues to fight that. We know that these groups have been worst affected by the pandemic, and we need them to take up the vaccine, but I am conscious that much of what we hear is based on anecdotal stories, rather than hard data at a community level, split by ethnicity. Can the Minister say what data he has on that and when colleagues can get council ward-level data, so that we can all be part of the effort to drive up take-up? As the first phase is coming to an end, can the Minister update us on the number of care home staff who have received their first dose and perhaps what the plan is to encourage those who have not done so to take it up on reflection?

When we get to the beginning of April, those who have had their first dose will be expecting and needing their second one. Can the Minister give an assurance that there will be enough supply to ensure that everyone who is due their second dose gets it, as well as, obviously, to manage those who are due their first? The Foreign Secretary would not offer that commitment on behalf of the Government recently. I hope the Vaccine Minister will be able to.

Colleagues have raised with me the fact that constituents who have received a national letter and called 119 to book are not routinely being offered local primary care network-based options. Can the Minister confirm that that should not be the case and that he would welcome hearing examples of where that is happening so that we can change it?

The Opposition fully supported the Government in prioritising those at greatest risk of dying—those in the first four categories—but as we move to categories 5 to 9, it is reasonable to ask the JCVI about including key workers. Data has shown that those who work closely with others and are regularly exposed to covid-19 have higher death rates than the rest of the population. By prioritising those workers alongside the over-50s and 60s, and people with underlying health conditions, we can reduce transmission further, protect more people and keep the vital services that they provide running smoothly, which includes reopening schools. Putting the politics of this to one side, we raised this suggestion over a week ago now. Will the Minister say whether he has had those conversations with the JCVI, or whether he will at least commit to asking it to look at how that suggestion might work?

It is HIV Testing Week. Those living with HIV are in category 6. If their doctor knows their HIV status, they will have their opportunity as planned. However, some choose, perfectly legitimately and for some profoundly important reasons, to access their healthcare through other means, such as an HIV clinic. Their doctor might therefore not know their status and they may well be missed. In this specific case, will the Minister commit to looking at a possible workaround? Allowing HIV clinics to connect those individuals directly would be one way, but we would support any effective way of doing that.

Finally, given that it is World Cancer Day, what consideration has the Minister given to vaccinating household members of the clinically extremely vulnerable, to give another layer of protection to blood cancer patients and other CEV people, an argument strongly supported by the reports that transmission is reduced by these vaccinations?

To conclude, this programme really is the light at the end of the tunnel. Our NHS has delivered, and we must support it to continue to do so by making the right policy decisions.

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his constructive way of engaging with the vaccination deployment programme. On trials, we have two running currently, both with Public Health England. The Vivaldi trial is testing residents of care homes, who were in category 1 of the JCVI categories. The second is Siren, which is testing frontline health workers, who are in category 2. As Jonathan Van-Tam, the deputy chief medical officer, has said, we will know the infection and transmission data from those trials in the next few weeks. Of course, the Oxford data is very promising—it needs to be peer reviewed—but those trials will also capture the Oxford vaccine, because obviously that came on site in January.

On the priority list, the JCVI looked very closely at both black, Asian and minority ethnic and, of course, other considerations, including by profession, and came down clearly on the side of age as the deciding factor in people's risk of dying from covid. This is a race against

death, hence the nine categories, which we are going through, and we will continue to do so. A number of professions will be captured in those categories. Of course, those with extremely severe illness will be captured in the category for the severely extremely vulnerable, and others will be captured in further categories down the phase 1 list.

I certainly think it would be wrong to change the JCVI recommendation, because categories 1 to 9 account for 99% of mortality. When we get into phase 2, we would welcome a debate and, of course, will ask the JCVI about including professions such as teachers, shop workers and police officers, who through their work come into contact with much greater volumes of the virus than others do, and it will advise us accordingly.

On BAME and ethnicity, the NHS now collects such data, and we are publishing it. We are doing an enormous amount of work not only across Government, but with the NHS, to ensure that we bring in local government so that we can begin to share data. I would welcome us working much closer with local government and the NHS so that we can identify, to the individual level, the people we need to protect as soon as possible.

I put it on the record that I want clinical commissioning groups to share data with MPs. Several colleagues—*[Interruption.]* Including you, Madam Deputy Speaker; I can see you nodding away vigorously. CCGs should and must engage with local politicians, because MPs get a lot of emails and telephone calls from concerned constituents in the top four most vulnerable categories. Of course, the NHS has plans to publish CCG-level data very soon.

As for care home staff, we had a fantastic response through the care home vaccination programme, which is category 1, and we continue to do more with staff to encourage them to be vaccinated, because we make four visits into care homes. Visit one is for the first dose, visit two is to try to vaccinate those who may have been infected the first time, because people cannot be vaccinated until after 28 days, visit three will be for second doses, and so on. We are getting greater traction with care home staff, but the hon. Gentleman is right to mention that. There is a big focus on helping them to go to hospital hubs and, of course, their primary care networks.

On the second dose, everyone who has had a first dose of Pfizer will get a second dose of Pfizer within that 12-week dosing period. That will begin in March in the usual way that the NHS does vaccinations. Everyone who has had a first dose of Oxford-AstraZeneca will get a second dose of Oxford-AstraZeneca within 12 weeks as well.

The hg is right to ask about people wanting the option of going either to a national vaccination centre or to the PCN. If right hon. and hon. Members have particular cases, please point them to us and we will do everything we can to ensure that that is facilitated.

The hon. Gentleman rightly highlighted HIV clinics. I will take that matter away and see whether there is a workaround for those who want to have that information remain private from their GP. We will see what we can do.

This is World Cancer Day, and there is now real excitement in the scientific community in the UK about the messenger RNA vaccine, because people can begin to think about vaccines for cancers as well. However, the hon. Gentleman raises an important point about

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those who care for the clinically extremely vulnerable, and we want to ensure that we deliver the JCVI phase 1 and then very quickly reach the rest of the population.

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con) [V]: I congratulate the Minister on his leadership of the vaccine roll-out programme, which really is one of the most impressive anywhere in the world. Indeed, I also commend the Health Secretary for the foundations that he laid last year.

Now that we know that mutations and variants are the name of the game, I want to ask the Minister about a worst-case scenario: a variant that is wholly immune to the vaccines that we are currently distributing. How possible is it that we could see that in the next few months in the UK? Has the Manaus variant, which people are particularly worried about, arrived here from Brazil? If we did see such a variant, what is the timescale not just to develop a new vaccine that works against it, but to manufacture it and get it approved by regulators so that it is ready to go?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee for his question, and he is absolutely right. The manufacturers are already working on variants to their vaccine to take into account the mutation of the virus. Viruses will mutate to survive and this virus is no different. There are about 4,000 mutations now around the world, some more concerning than others. We have, in the United Kingdom, a genome sequencing industry that is a world leader—about 50%, or just under, of the sequencing has taken place in the United Kingdom. Not only are we working with the current manufacturers—Pfizer-BioNTech, AstraZeneca and Moderna—that have been approved, but we are also looking at how we can make sure that we make the most of the new messenger RNA technology, which allows the rapid development of vaccine variants that will then deal with the virus variants as rapidly as possible. When I spoke to the Science and Technology Committee a few weeks ago, I said that we were planning to have in place the ability to go from the moment that we can sequence a variant that we are really concerned about to the moment that we can have a vaccine ready in between 30 to 40 days, with then, of course, the manufacturing time.

We have invested in Oxfordshire, in the Vaccines Manufacturing and Innovation Centre, and in the Cell and Gene Therapy Catapult Manufacturing Innovation Centre in Braintree—£127 million there and just shy of £100 million in Oxfordshire—to be ready to manufacture any vaccine that we would need. The Prime Minister, of course, also visited those making what I refer to as our seventh vaccine, the Valneva vaccine. That is a whole inactivated virus, so it does not just work on the spikes in the way that the two current vaccines that we are deploying work. It works on the whole of the virus, which is much more likely to capture any mutations from the spikes and therefore be incredibly effective. We have invested in that production facility in Scotland so that we can have that vaccine as a future-proofing of annual vaccination strategies or a booster in the autumn, if necessary.

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP) [V]: I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. I am glad to hear his recognition of the

importance of adherence to the clinical categories of the JCVI, and I also give my thanks to vaccination teams in my Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath constituency, across Scotland and, indeed, these islands.

I urge the Minister, however, to think more lightly of himself and deeply of the world. Over recent weeks, the UK Government and their allies in Scotland have quite disgracefully been attempting to sow fear in the minds of our vulnerable communities that vaccine deployment is too slow. That narrative was completely debunked yesterday, yet the Prime Minister still claimed that we have today passed the milestone of 10 million vaccines in the United Kingdom, including almost 90% of those aged 75 and over in England, and every eligible person in a care home. Today, however, on “Good Morning Scotland”, the Minister was further pressed on how many vaccines had been given—not offered, but given to people in care homes in England. Even with 24 hours’ warning and following a detailed probing, he was not able to offer more than a vague 91% of those eligible in an ill-defined subset, before settling on “a very high number”, and suggesting that care home staff’s vaccination may not yet have begun in England. Can he tell us today what percentage of all care home residents and all care home staff have had their jab in England and, if not, why not?

To return to the JCVI clinical prioritisation, in a recent written parliamentary question to the Minister regarding the clinically extremely vulnerable, he chose to regurgitate JCVI guidance rather than answering the question. With the encouraging news that the Oxford vaccine and potentially others have a measurable impact on transmission, can he update the House on what steps he has taken to ask the JCVI to review current guidance for household members of the clinically extremely vulnerable, such as people with blood cancer or organ transplantation, and thus provide a vital layer of protection to those who may not be able to receive the vaccine themselves?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful for the hon. Member’s question, albeit, dare I say, I do not recognise his description of our collaboration. We have, over the past two weeks, been working solidly. The British Army—the armed forces—have been working to deliver 80 vaccination sites in Scotland and to hand them over to NHS Scotland within 28 days, and that work began a couple of weeks ago. So I hope he recognises the effort the United Kingdom is putting in not just in supplying the vaccines for Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England, but in the way we are trying to support the vaccine deployment in Scotland.

Of course, last weekend was our target to make sure that every eligible care home in England was visited, and over 10,000 care homes have actually been visited and received the vaccine. Only a handful of care homes, which were deemed to have an outbreak, were not visited. The NHS, quite rightly, celebrated achieving that target last weekend, so I am slightly saddened, in a way, that there is this politicking between ourselves about this issue.

We continue—as the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris), asked me—to work very hard to make sure that staff in care homes are also offered the vaccine on those visits, and they also have an opportunity to be vaccinated in their primary care networks and, of course, in hospitals.

On the JCVI, those who are clinically extremely vulnerable are in category 4, and we will vaccinate them by mid-February.

Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con) [V]: Will my hon. Friend join me in thanking local health teams and volunteers for the incredible vaccination efforts we have seen in North Lincolnshire? I know they are keen to deliver even more. Can he give an update on the progress he is making on increasing weekly vaccine supplies?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's question. I certainly join her in thanking the teams that have been working and delivering in North Lincolnshire. These are extraordinary people doing really incredible work, and I want to thank them from the bottom of my heart.

We try as hard as we can in the team to make sure we give as much notice as possible to local teams about when they are getting their delivery. This week, yesterday—Wednesday—everyone would have had notice of their deliveries for next week. We want to give as much notice as possible. Our limiting factor remains vaccine supply. It is becoming more stable, and we have greater visibility of vaccines all the way through to March, hence our confidence about meeting our targets. I can reassure my hon. Friend that her local teams will get the vaccines they need to meet the mid-February target of vaccinating the top four cohorts and protecting them before that date.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD) [V]: It was an immense privilege this morning to visit the Stoop in Twickenham, home to Harlequins rugby, which opens today as a local mass vaccination hub. The NHS, Quins and the council have done an incredible job to be in a position to start vaccinating 500 people a day.

The Minister has spoken quite a lot about care home staff and some of the challenges in driving uptake among those staff, but we know that domiciliary care staff are also lagging behind in the vaccination rates. One industry survey has suggested that only 32% have been vaccinated so far. Could I press the Minister again: what are the latest vaccination rates for both care home staff and home care staff, what are the reasons for this lag and how can we best work together to address this problem?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful for the hon. Lady's question. It is great to hear about the Harlequins joining the fight, as they always do, when it comes to the United Kingdom actually getting people protected and vaccinated.

Care home and domiciliary staff are both on our priority list, as the hon. Lady knows. We are working with local government, and David Pearson, who is of course a champion of the social care sector, has been working with local government to identify them. The best way to identify domiciliary staff is through local government, because a lot of people will be with agencies and, as the hon. Lady quite rightly pointed out, are hard to reach. They are in our target: they are part of the top four categories, with those who are caring for the elderly in residential care homes, and we will meet our target of offering them a vaccine by mid-February.

Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con) [V]: British-based pharmaceutical companies have been pivotal in the global fight against this pandemic. Plants in Teesside,

Livingston and Oxford, and Wockhardt in my constituency, are central to vaccine manufacture. So what conversations has my hon. Friend had with his Home Office counterparts to provide sufficient security to these vital pieces of national vaccine infrastructure?

Nadhim Zahawi: I want to reassure my hon. Friend that, through the vaccines taskforce, we have been liaising extensively with the vaccines' developers and the related organisations to ensure that the highest level of security exists through the whole vaccine deployment chain. That has, of course, included working directly with the manufacturers, and we have a senior responsible officer seconded to the team to make sure that security is at the forefront of everything we do to deliver this programme. We cannot allow a lapse of security to get in the way of the largest vaccination programme in the history of this country.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his concerted strategy and for the overall roll-out of covid vaccines. We are deeply indebted to him for the focus he has given. Does he intend there to be a route by which those who are younger and still attending front-facing work are able to access their vaccine? Furthermore, what co-ordination has there been with GPs' surgeries to assist them in categorising need when assessing those who are vulnerable but who did not have shielding CEV letters?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising this issue. It is a priority for us and we will be saying more on it very soon, because the groups who have not received the letters but are shielding remain incredibly important. He is absolutely right to raise the issue, which is a priority for us.

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con) [V]: Getting to 10 million vaccines is a major milestone and a serious achievement, and I am pleased to report to my hon. Friend that, thanks to the dedication of many local people, the roll-out in Eastbourne has got off to a very strong start. However, as access and options have increased with new sites coming on stream, there has been some initial public confusion over the different routes and communications. The concern is that the "did not attend" rate, which has to date been insignificant, could now increase. Will my hon. Friend, who is doing such sterling work, assure me that as we march forward the structure of this brave new vaccine campaign is being reviewed and that we can have confidence?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her question. I am delighted to see that in her constituency the vaccination programme has rolled out so efficiently and well. She is right to point out the issue of choice; we deliberately wanted people to have the choice to be able to go to a vaccination centre or to go through their primary care networks or hospital hub. I will make sure that each and every person in those four categories is offered a vaccine. We have a strategy, which we are now implementing because we are so close to that deadline, of reaching out to the granular level—to GPs—to go through exactly the population in each of those four categories, in order to make sure we know that everybody has been reached and offered that vaccine. I just give her that reassurance.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Pharmacies cannot contribute in the vaccine programme unless they commit to deliver at least 1,000 vaccines a week. That precludes many community pharmacies embedded within those communities where some residents cannot access the vaccination centres. So will the Minister allow local pharmacies to work together to deliver smaller volumes, so that they can reach more residents who would not otherwise get a vaccine?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful for the hon. Lady's question. Community and independent pharmacies have a significant role to play; she may have heard me refer earlier to the hundreds that are already in the programme, delivering vaccines. The reason for the 1,000 vaccinations a week minimum is that, when vaccine supply is finite and every dose matters, we cannot afford for vaccines to just sit in a fridge in a smaller pharmacy. As vaccine supply begins to improve, we can look at bringing in more pharmacies. At the moment, 98% of the country is within 10 miles of a vaccination site; for the 2%, we will go to them with a pop-up site. I want us to get to a stage, once we have done phase 1, where we are maybe able to be more convenient and where people can pop into their local pharmacy once supply allows.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con) [V]: The data concerning the Pfizer vaccination recommended that the second jab be given within three weeks. As the Minister has said today, the interval is currently 12 weeks. I am hearing of concerns from the medical world about this gap, which it is claimed risks reducing the vaccine's efficacy. Could he update the House on this matter?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. Pfizer itself says that it is up to the national regulatory authority to advise on the dosing interval. Not only the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency—which is our regulator—but the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation and the four chief medical officers of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all agreed that the up to 12-week interval for Pfizer-BioNTech is exactly the right thing to do to make sure we protect as many people as possible. They cited Pfizer's own data that, after 15 days, up to 21 days, protection is up to 89% with the first dose.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab) [V]: One of my main primary care centres only has enough vaccine supply to open for half the week. Whether this is because vaccines are being directed to other types of centre—like the major centres that we do not yet have—or are bypassing London, or because there are simply not enough vaccines full stop, targets are being missed. Only 70% of over-80s and 55% of all priority groups had been vaccinated by this week. Can the Minister look at supply to Hammersmith and Fulham, and to London generally?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's question, and I will certainly look at that specific example, if he is able to give me the details. The data that will be published at 2 pm for his sustainability and transformation partnership will show that vaccination levels for the over-80s are now over 75%, which is an improvement, but they need to go even further, so I will happily take a

look at that. Of course, the recent large vaccination site opened at Network House, Wembley will also help with that.

Mark Eastwood (Dewsbury) (Con) [V]: Frontline nurses, doctors and care staff in Dewsbury, Mirfield, Kirkburton and Denby Dale have done an amazing job during this pandemic, working long hours under immense pressure, and it is only right that they have been included in the first phase of the vaccinations. Could my hon. Friend confirm the percentage take-up rate of vaccinations for NHS and care home staff?

Nadhim Zahawi: I agree with my hon. Friend. The fantastic NHS staff have stepped up in the most challenging of circumstances, and it is imperative that they are part of this first phase of the vaccination programme.

A significant milestone was achieved last week, as my hon. Friend will have heard me say earlier: we have now gone into every eligible care home of older adults to offer their staff and residents their first dose of the vaccine. This is testament to our remarkable care home staff and NHS workers. I urge all social care and frontline health care workers to take up the vaccine when it is offered to them. The recent large vaccination centre for my hon. Friend's constituency is the Spectrum Community Health CIC in Wakefield, which staff can also access. We continue to make progress with staff, and our aim is to offer to each and every member of staff that vaccination by the middle of February.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab) [V]: The news that a mutated form of the new, more infectious Kent variant has been found in Bristol has worried a lot of people. I appreciate what the Minister said earlier about developing new vaccine variants as we go along, but where does that leave people who have already been vaccinated or who will be vaccinated before the new vaccines come on stream? What reassurance can the Minister offer?

Nadhim Zahawi: The hon. Lady raises an important point. The vaccines that we are currently deploying will work on the variants that are in the United Kingdom. Both the deputy chief medical officer, Jonathan Van-Tam, and the chief scientific adviser have said that they would be very surprised if the current vaccines have no impact on the variants of the virus, so we continue to vaccinate at speed, at the same time, of course, as being vigilant by sequencing the new variants. Of course, we are able to react, with the manufacturers, to any future need in respect of the vaccination programme. At the moment, the vaccines are exactly the right thing to do, including because of the protection against severe infection and hospitalisation that they offer, which remains incredibly high with both vaccines.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con) [V]: Further to my question to the Prime Minister last week in which I called for a mass vaccination centre in Medway—also called for by fellow Medway Members of Parliament—I welcome the proposals by Kent and Medway CCG to increase capacity at Medway Maritime Hospital, which now needs to be added to the national booking programme. However, the Minister knows from conversations with Members of Parliament from Medway that we urgently need a mass vaccination centre in

Medway. We have a population of 280,000 and are one of the areas hardest hit by covid in the country. I need the Minister to ensure, now, urgently and swiftly, that we get a mass vaccination centre in Medway, in line with our needs. Linked to that, will the Minister join me in paying tribute to the fantastic NHS staff throughout Medway and at Medway Maritime Hospital, and to the great work that the CCG is doing in Kent?

Nadhim Zahawi: My hon. Friend and I have had conversations about this matter because he is a great champion of his constituents. He will be aware that there has been a huge amount of work to step up vaccination services in Medway in recent weeks. Each primary care network site receives its own supply, and work has been carried out with the local CCG to ensure that the vaccine supply aligns with the number of registered patients in the priority cohort groups—groups 1 to 4. When some sites progress through their supply more quickly than others, we work with them to ensure that supplies are replenished as quickly as possible so that they can continue to vaccinate the most vulnerable. We are keeping a close watch on my hon. Friend's area because, as he quite rightly points out, it has gone through some difficulties. I reassure him that the latest numbers I have for the Kent and Medway STP show that 86.3% of over-80s have had the first dose.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP) [V]: The Leader of the House and the Minister talk of the beneficence of this Government. Yesterday, soon-to-be Baroness Davidson asked Scotland's First Minister whether she would accept armed forces help with vaccine deployment, in spite of huge increases in the roll-out in Scotland. As Scotland contributes to the UK armed forces—as do all parts of the UK—is it not time to stop using this dreadful pandemic to portray the deployment of our armed services in such a cynical and divisive way?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful for the hon. Member's question, although I am slightly surprised because it is the United Kingdom's armed forces and the United Kingdom's vaccine that are being deployed, and I hope we can celebrate that. *[Interruption.]* I see the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) nodding across the Dispatch Box—and I think he is smiling underneath that mask as well.

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con) [V]: I join others in congratulating the Minister on the incredible, world-leading roll-out of the vaccine—I would have expected nothing less from my brilliant friend and colleague. May I reinforce the plea from my hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti) for a Medway vaccination centre, for all the reasons he gave? Perhaps it would be helpful if we could meet the Minister to discuss that in more detail. My PCNs are doing a phenomenal job in racing through the top four priority groups, but at present they do not have access to IT systems, such as Outcomes4Health and Foundry, that would enable them to analyse and plan properly. My understanding is that access was promised but might not have happened universally, so could the Minister reassure the House that this is being rectified urgently to support the next and larger phase of vaccine roll-out?

Nadhim Zahawi: I add my thanks to those of my hon. Friend for the relentless determination of her excellent local PCNs to vaccinate the most vulnerable. I would be very happy to meet colleagues to go through in detail the plan up to mid-February, which is our target, and beyond. I am also happy to take away her PCNs' specific concern about data sharing. Our mantra in the team is to make as much data available as quickly as possible, when we know that it is robust and actionable, so we will look at her point about Foundry and Outcomes4Health to ensure that we can share that. I want to get to a stage where every PCN can track its order, in the way we track an order from Amazon. We have reached basecamp, but we have a big climb ahead of us to vaccinate the whole nation.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab) [V]: May I start by thanking all the staff in our primary care networks and in our NHS for the magnificent work they have done to ensure that as many people in the priority groups in the north-east are vaccinated? In any call and recall system for vaccines, some people will inevitably be missed, so when will directors of public health get the data they need, in sufficient detail, to be able to address those inequalities and contact those who have not responded?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that incredibly important question. Her region has done phenomenally well. I want to praise it because it has 91.8% of first doses for the over-80s in the STP. The NHS is already sharing data with local government. We need to make it more granular. We have brought into the deployment campaign Eleanor Kelly, the former chief executive of Southwark Council, so we are totally in line and integrated with local government, because they know exactly where those hard-to-reach groups are. The hon. Lady raises an incredibly important point and that is a big focus for me.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con) [V]: The Government have done brilliantly well in securing more than 350 million jobs, which is enough, all being well, to vaccinate the at-risk population several times over. Given the UK's relatively enlightened and co-operative approach to vaccine roll-out internationally—in sharp contrast to the narrow and vindictive nationalism of certain quarters of the European Union, which really ought to know better—what trigger points and timetable does my hon. Friend envisage for the disbursement of our inventory of surplus jobs, and the infrastructure necessary to deliver them to countries that are less advantaged than our own?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his excellent question. My absolute priority is to ensure that we have the inventory—as he quite rightly describes it—to allow us to offer the vaccine to all adults in the United Kingdom, and at the moment we are nowhere near that. Supply remains the limiting factor in our first target, which is to vaccinate groups 1 to 4 by mid-February, and then groups 5 to 9 as soon as we can after that, with phase 2, which we have been discussing today, after that. He is absolutely right that we have now ordered or optioned 407 million doses of vaccine. Once we are in a position to secure enough vaccine for the United Kingdom's population, we will be able to look at where else we can help with our

[*Nadhim Zahawi*]

vaccine supply. We have also put £1.3 billion into a combination of Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, and COVAX. Of that £1.3 billion, approximately £480 million is going to COVAX, which is helping low and middle-income countries with their vaccination programmes as we speak.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab) [V]: I was grateful for the Minister's support for the video that I and colleagues across the House with south Asian heritage produced to encourage take-up of the vaccine throughout the UK's south Asian communities. He knows that there is real concern about the impact of the disinformation being spread online and offline in black, Asian and minority ethnic communities. Worryingly, much of the disinformation appears to play on people's faith or race. What work is he and Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport colleagues undertaking to tackle the spread of vaccine disinformation online?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful and incredibly encouraged by the hon. Gentleman's brilliant initiative, taken with many colleagues across the House, to deliver that brilliant video of south Asian MPs from different political backgrounds and traditions all recommending that, when people's turn comes, they should take the vaccine.

We have been working across Government. In the Cabinet Office, the covid disinformation unit was set up in March. It works online with the digital platforms to ensure that we identify disinformation and misinformation to them. They should be taking that down immediately. My message to all of them, whether Twitter, Facebook or any of them is this: "You must, must be responsible and play your part in taking this disinformation down as soon as we flag it up to you."

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con) [V]: I am sure my hon. Friend would like to join me in paying huge tribute to the NHS colleagues and volunteers who have rolled out the vaccine with such speed in Gloucestershire. However, is he able to tell the House whether there will be any clarity about when the nine priority categories are likely to be completed? Will that inform the Government on how they can produce a road map for a roll-out of the wider economy, as my businesses in the Cotswolds are desperate for clarity on that matter?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. I will certainly join him in thanking the NHS family and army of volunteers. They have done phenomenally well. I can tell him that in his STP in Gloucestershire, 94% of the over-80s have received their first dose—that is pretty good going. He will know that we have built a deployment infrastructure than can deploy as much vaccine supply as we are able to bring in. A couple of Saturdays ago, we reached a record of just shy of 600,000 doses in a single day. That is, I guess, a demonstration of the capability of the infrastructure. We continue to grow it, as I announced today. It is very much dependent on vaccine supply. We have good visibility from here to the end of March, with more volume coming through beyond that. My focus should—I hope he agrees—be on the mid-February deadline to vaccinate those top four cohorts of the most vulnerable. That

is 88% of mortality and, if we can get them done by mid-February, we will have achieved a real milestone in our fight against this virus.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab) [V]: The vaccination centre in Chesterfield, the largest town in Derbyshire, is open for only two days this week and for a maximum of two days next week, because NHS England apparently imposed much smaller vaccination numbers on the primary care network hubs than the national centres get. The Derbyshire primary care network states that it could achieve the Minister's targets if it had the same access to vaccines and the national booking system as the national hubs service. Will he explain why the national centres are prioritised over the local primary care network hubs in towns such as Chesterfield?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. The primary care networks have done a fantastic job in delivering the vaccine roll-out and will continue do so as we go beyond the first four cohorts into cohorts 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9 and then the next phase. Of course we want to make sure that people have choice. He will know by 2 pm, I think—when the next set of data is published—that his STP has reached 89% of the over-80s, which is an incredible achievement, the bulk of which has been done by the primary care networks. We will continue to support those networks. Through him, I send my thanks and appreciation to them and say that we will redouble our efforts to make sure that they get the vaccine doses that they need to get through not just the first four cohorts, but beyond that to the deployment programme for groups 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con) [V]: I am very pleased that the Government have agreed that, once the vaccines have become effective for the first four cohorts from 8 March, we can start unlocking the economy. Does the Minister agree that, once the first nine groups have been vaccinated, accounting for 99% of deaths and about 80% of hospitalisations, that would be the right time for all restrictions to be relaxed so that we can get back to living as normal, with our children back at school and the economy fully open?

Nadhim Zahawi: There is no one who wants to see the economy open and functioning as soon as possible more than my right hon. Friend and the Prime Minister. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) rightly points out, the deadline for the top four cohorts is the middle of February. If we go forward three weeks from there, that is when the protection of the two vaccines really kicks in. The plan is to reopen schools on 8 March, after which we will gradually reopen the economy. It is important also to wait for the evidence. As I said earlier, the Vivaldi study and the SIREN study will enable us to see the impact of the vaccines on infection rates and on transmission. We are getting some really positive data from Israel and, of course, from the Oxford team. That will be our own robust evidence and, as the Prime Minister said, we will then share with the House on 22 February the roadmap of how we intend very gradually to reopen the economy.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP) [V]: The UK Government have pre-purchased 300 million doses for a population of 66 million. Guinea, a low-income

country, has received only 55 doses for its entire population. Given that COVAX will cover only about 20% of the population in low and middle-income countries, can the Minister explain how the UK will step up and take part as global Britain, ensuring that those people in low and middle-income countries and developing countries are able to access the vaccine?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her question. We will do so in a couple of ways. First, once we have enough vaccine supply to be able to offer the vaccine to every adult in the United Kingdom—every eligible group from 1 to 9 and then phase 2—we will then look at our vaccine supply strategy. At the moment, we are nowhere near having enough supply to be able to make that offer. That has to be our priority. She mentions COVAX, but that is only part of the story for us in the United Kingdom. We have put about £450 million-plus into COVAX, but a total of £1.3 billion into the vaccine initiative of GAVI, the Vaccine Alliance. We are, I think, the largest donor, not only in money but per capita. We are making a big, big impact globally in both research and development, and vaccinations to low and middle-income countries.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I appreciate that colleagues have complicated questions to ask the Minister and that the answers are therefore also complicated, but I must ask for a bit more speed now, because we have taken an hour. I should stop proceedings on this item of business, but I will not do so because I appreciate that there are important questions to be asked. I urge Members to go just a little faster.

John Howell (Henley) (Con) [V]: First, let me offer my congratulations to the Minister on achieving more than 10 million vaccinations. I wonder whether he will comment on how soon I will be able to wander down to my local chemist to get a jab, as I did for flu.

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's congratulations. I stand on the shoulders of heroes; it is the army of the NHS family, volunteers and our armed forces that is doing the real heavy lifting in this deployment.

I visited Cullimore chemist in Edgware, a brilliant independent chemist that is delivering the vaccination programme. At the moment, the limiting factor is the ability to do 1,000 vaccine doses a week because of the finite amount of vaccine. However, as we get more volume through, I, like my hon. Friend, want to see convenience, so that someone can walk down the road to their local chemist. I look forward to doing that with him, I hope, one day.

Sir Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: We know that all vaccinations are captured in real time and populate GP records within 24 hours. However, only the aggregated data is provided to local vaccination leads. It is absolutely necessary that they receive line-by-line data at citizen level to enable them to respond immediately to low uptake—for example from BAME communities—or accessibility issues in identified cohorts. When will the Minister provide local vaccination leads with the detailed line-by-line vaccination data that is required to level up the fight against this deadly disease, and can he explain why it is not already being shared?

Nadhim Zahawi: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that we need to share as much granular data as possible with local public health officials and, of course, make sure that local government can target home by home, individual by individual, as soon as possible. I want to see the CCG-level data published, and the NHS will be doing that very soon. We continue to make sure that we work closely with local government to understand what additional data is needed, and I mentioned Eleanor Kelly joining the team from local government. That is exactly my intention, and the hon. Gentleman raises a really important question, because if we are going to target and reach the hard-to-reach groups in the BAME community, we need that information.

Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con) [V]: I wholeheartedly congratulate my hon. Friend and all those involved in delivering over 10 million vaccines to the most vulnerable in our communities right across the UK, including at the vaccination hub opened on Tuesday at Ludlow racecourse with support to the local NHS from Royal Air Force medics, volunteers from Shropshire Fire and Rescue Service and Shropshire Council, and many community volunteers. May I ask my hon. Friend to consider most carefully, for those areas where deployment of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine proved especially difficult—for example, primary care networks covering remote rural areas, with small GP practices and a sparse population, and lacking suitable premises to host large numbers per day, such as in south-west Shropshire—whether deliveries of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine can be prioritised to ensure that the priority group targets are met?

Nadhim Zahawi: My right hon. Friend will appreciate the importance of maximising the vaccine available to GPs by using both the Pfizer vaccine and the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine, but in recent weeks the volume of Oxford-AstraZeneca going to GP sites has been higher than that of Pfizer, allowing the flex to visit the housebound and care homes and to deploy at individual practices in rural areas, as he rightly points out. Any site that wishes to discuss its vaccine allocations should do so with its local system in the first instance, and thereafter with the NHS regional team, but I am very happy to look at any specific examples.

Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab) [V]: The Minister was uncharacteristically coy in answer to the hon. Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) about how we will kick on after the top four priority groups have been vaccinated. Will he give us a bit more detail about when he believes all adults over 50 will have received their vaccination? Clearly there are members of his own party who wish to open up faster than that, and with more than 1,000 people a day still dying, we have to ensure that we make the right decisions.

Nadhim Zahawi: I will keep it short, Madam Deputy Speaker. My target is mid-February for the top four cohorts. Either I or the Secretary of State will then come to the Dispatch Box to share with the House the plan beyond category 4, into categories 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9.

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con) [V]: Will the Minister join me in thanking the staff of Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board, our GP practices and the many volunteers who have worked so hard in recent weeks to deliver

[Robin Millar]

more than 100,000 doses of vaccine across Aberconwy and the beautiful but rural north Wales? Can he confirm that Public Health Wales has received enough vaccine doses to vaccinate the first four priority groups in Wales by mid-February?

Nadhim Zahawi: I will certainly join my hon. Friend in congratulating the Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board, the GPs and their teams and the many volunteers. I can confirm that Wales and the Welsh NHS will have received the allocation for groups 1 to 4 by mid-February for them to be able to do that, and I commend them for the work they are doing.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD) [V]: Unpaid carers provide a huge service to our community in South Lakeland, especially for the people they care for directly. If they get ill, that is a huge welfare risk for the people they care for. There has been confusion over whether unpaid carers will be prioritised for the vaccine, because although the Government said that they would be in priority group 6, they are missing from other communications, including the summary list in the vaccine delivery plan. Will the Minister clarify once and for all that unpaid carers rightly will be on the priority list?

Nadhim Zahawi: We are absolutely looking to make sure that unpaid carers are on the priority list.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con) [V]: Lockdown has affected the mental wellbeing of almost everyone in this country. The vaccine programme will mean that the NHS comes into contact with almost every adult in the country. With that in mind, will the Minister consider having a mental health worker at all the national vaccine centres, to provide opportunistic mental health interventions should people need it?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's excellent, thoughtful suggestion. I will certainly take that away and discuss it with the Minister responsible in the Department.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Thank you. We have covered a lot of ground. I will now suspend the House for three minutes, so that the Chamber can be prepared for the next item of business.

1.47 pm

Sitting suspended.

BILL PRESENTED

MINISTERIAL AND OTHER MATERNITY ALLOWANCES

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Penny Mordaunt, supported by the Prime Minister, Secretary Priti Patel, Michael Gove, Secretary Robert Buckland, and Secretary Elizabeth Truss, presented a Bill to make provision for payments to or in respect of Ministers and holders of Opposition offices on maternity leave.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 255) with explanatory notes (Bill 255-EN).

Backbench Business

UK Space Industry

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): We now come to the Back-Bench debate on the future of the UK space industry. To move the motion, I call the man in the Irn-Bru mask, Owen Thompson.

1.51 pm

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of the UK space industry.

I am delighted to have secured this important debate today and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for us to consider such an important topic. We all need good news stories in these difficult times, and I believe that the growing space industry, with timely and sensible support from the Government, could quite literally provide a rocket boost to the economy and be a force for good for the country and the planet.

Space is one of the UK's fastest growing sectors, trebling in size since 2010. It will inspire the next generation and provide fantastic opportunities in science, engineering and technology. It has huge potential for the levelling-up agenda, creating highly skilled jobs right across the UK from Shetland to the south-east of England. It can also play a crucial role in measuring and meeting climate change targets. I welcome the fact that space has been recognised as a critical national infrastructure, in that we now depend on space for navigation, communication, broadcasting, running public services and increasingly for national security. It impacts all our everyday lives and has the potential to really enhance them. So while I am delighted by the recognition of the scale of the potential for space, there needs to be a better co-ordinated and determined effort to support the industry to reach its goals, and I look forward to getting the details on that from the Minister later today.

Space is already a growing success story. It supports 41,900 jobs in 13 of the regions and nations of the UK, bringing in some £14.8 billion in 2016-17. The Scottish space industry also punches well above its weight and is home to almost a fifth of the total jobs in the UK sector, valued at £880 million in 2017-18. Scotland now hosts more than 130 space organisations, including the headquarters of 83 UK space firms. We now need to build on that strong base to be globally competitive at every stage of the process from the design and manufacture of smaller satellites through to the launch and the interpretation and application of the satellite data produced. We have our unique selling points, and we are making great progress. Glasgow is now a European capital for manufacturing small satellites, building more than any other place outside California.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. He is absolutely right about the importance of the space industry and the significance that it has for Glasgow's economy. Research in the space sector is hugely important as well. Madam Deputy Speaker, I was sporting a University of Glasgow mask, just as my hon. Friend was sporting an Irn-Bru mask. The University of Glasgow has played a huge part in the identification of gravitational waves,

for example, which is helping our understanding of the universe as well as driving forward technological developments.

Owen Thompson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Use of the data that we can gather from space is important in so many different ways that can contribute to so much that we can take forward.

Innovations by companies such as AAC Clyde Space, Spire Global and Alba Orbital are already driving this world-class agenda. We are leading the way in rocket development in Europe through firms such as Skyrora in my Midlothian constituency and Orbex in Forres. We are making progress in the research and analysis side of the industry, and companies such as Ecometrica, Carbomap and Space Intelligence are helping to move Edinburgh towards becoming the space data capital of Europe. Edinburgh is the only place in the world to work with a NASA robot, the Valkyrie, outside of its headquarters.

Key industry players such as Ukrainian-born Skyrora boss Volodymyr Levykin tell me that they moved here because of the connections, the skilled workforce and our suitability as a place to live. Scotland is developing a space industry ecosystem, and the more it develops, the more it triggers further exponential growth. The Scottish Government were therefore right to identify space as a key priority for future growth. Their support has helped to give the burgeoning young industry a shape and structure, with the ambition to be Europe's leading space nation and capture a £4 billion share of the global space market by 2030.

The Scottish Space Leadership Council has helped to bring together key figures from the public and private sectors, to ensure that their views are represented at all levels of government and to drive growth and collaboration, but we need co-ordination across all levels of government. A space strategy has often been promised, but we are still waiting to see it delivered. I am sure those watching today's debate will be as keen as I am to hear what the Minister has to say on that front. To take things forward, we need to get low-cost access to space from UK soil. It is good news that seven UK spaceport sites are working together through the Spaceport Alliance to support launch activity. It is also good news that the space hub to be built in Sutherland's A' Mhòine peninsula received planning permission last year. With locational advantages for flight paths and access to orbits that 95% of small satellite launches require, it is now set to be a national centre for vertical launch and could support 400 jobs in the highlands and islands by 2025.

Yet getting the regulations in place is at times more like moving through treacle than rocketing away into a new space future. We need to get the regulations to permit rocket launches, to give clarity about how the system will work and to get it right. The framework was set up in the Space Industry Act 2018, but it is still not in place, and we still await the outcome of the consultation process. When we hear the results, I certainly hope that the Government will have listened carefully to industry voices and taken their concerns on board. So far there has been a lot of dither and interdepartmental confusion, and unfortunately a lack of determined leadership from the Government on these regulatory issues. I might be tempted, Madam Deputy Speaker, to suggest that a rocket somewhere might be helpful, but I shall resist. However, it is not always clear who is in the driving seat, if anyone.

We cannot jeopardise the achievements of an innovative home-grown industry by letting it drift and losing out on launch capability to neighbouring nations. The Minister will be aware of the real threat of international competition to UK launch businesses. One of our home-grown companies, Skyrora, has already tested a rocket with a 26 km altitude, but it had to do so from Iceland, where the regulations were taken forward, with all the essential safety aspects, but more quickly and far more favourably than has been managed here.

The concern is that the licence application process for launch will take far too long to process, resulting in the industry being uncompetitive. I hope the Minister can assure the House in her response today that there is a development strategy in place that embraces all parts of the space industry and has a clear imperative around which the Government, regulators and industry can coalesce to ensure the full potential of space ambition.

I was slightly concerned that, despite not having our home-grown regulation sorted, the Government were so happy and keen to sign the transatlantic technology safeguards agreement, to enable US launches from UK soil, potentially to the detriment of the industry here. The TSA was signed last June and announced by press release, but the text was not made public until October. Many industry players in the UK say they did not have a chance to read and comment on the plans until that point and had not been consulted on the details, nor was there an opportunity for questions and debate in this place, despite the promise given in response to written questions that I submitted. This might turn out to be a benign agreement, as the UK Government have claimed, but there has been no process to scrutinise it, and some aspects certainly raised the concern that UK start-ups could be ousted for big US-based corporate players.

The Government must do more to allay industry fears that it could transpire to be an exclusivity agreement, and they must reassure the industry that they understand and are sensitive to the commercial context in which these companies operate. The industry remains in the dark about how the agreement will actually function in practice, and it will only see the impact once it starts to acquire export licences. That kind of scenario testing should have been conducted openly and transparently beforehand.

Some might question why we are talking about space at all, in the midst of a public health emergency and when people cannot feed their families, but space shapes all our lives. The sector helps to keep us safe, and it is precisely the sort of high-skilled growth industry that we need to support to drive the economy to recover.

There is also a responsibility—the green role that could be carved out by the space industry, which the Scottish Government are certainly very keen to pursue. Space is central to tackling environmental and social justice issues around the globe. Forget the outdated image of a space race, with astronauts boldly going where no one has gone before. The future will be very much focused on making things better where we are now. Data from satellites plays a crucial role in the fight against climate change and finding solutions for major issues that scar our planet. Some 35 of the 45 essential climate variables defined by the UN are measured from space. Similarly, of the 17 sustainable development goals set by the UN with an aim of ending poverty by 2030, satellite data plays a critical role in 13.

[Owen Thompson]

Data from earth observation satellites has been used to combat wildfire spread in the Amazon, to monitor glacier melt and air pollutants, to aid disaster relief operations, to measure ozone damage, to measure damage from natural disasters, such as the Fuego volcano, to track and predict malaria outbreaks and to tackle illegal deforestation and pirate fishing vessels.

It is great to see Scotland leading the way. Satellites built and launched in Scotland can monitor the environment in ways not previously possible, including mapping global carbon levels. Glasgow University and Strathclyde University focus on that work with their innovation district, and I welcome plans for the new £5 million satellite centre involving the universities of Edinburgh and Leeds, which will use cutting-edge satellite technology to help combat climate change, including helping lower the risk of people being affected by flooding.

Rocket launches do not exactly have a reputation for being green, but the new space industry must be an environmentally responsible one. Efforts must be made to reduce harmful emissions at launches, and I would like to see a role for environmental regulators such as the Scottish Environment Protection Agency in regulating spaceflight. The good news is that modern micro-launches being developed are a world away from the traditional massive gas guzzling old ones. Orbex, for example, built a micro-launcher fuelled by bio propane, which produces 90% fewer emissions than standard kerosene. Skyrora has successfully tested a fuel called Ecosene, which is created from plastic waste that would otherwise have gone to landfill.

In conclusion, the UK space industry is a massively positive story, but to ensure a happy ending, the Government must: give clarity on their long-term strategic goals; sort out the regulations with urgency; improve the level of scrutiny and consultation in their agreements; show an understanding and sensitivity to market forces; and show ambition in harnessing the potential of space in boosting our post-covid recovery and in tackling climate change. We are at the edge of a vast universe of possibilities for the space sector, so it is vital now that the Government provide the necessary vision, energy and direction to propel us forward.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): As Members are aware, there is a three-minute time limit on Back-Bench speeches.

2.3 pm

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con) [V]: May I declare an interest as the chairman of the parliamentary space committee? As I am sure you can appreciate, Madam Deputy Speaker, three minutes is not long enough to go through everything that the space industry has to offer at this moment in time—a lot is going on in the space industry.

The space sector in the UK is a growing sector that has seen a 60% growth in turnover since 2010. The sector employs 42,000 people directly, including 1,500 apprentices. In 2018, it had a turnover of £14 billion, with £5.5 billion of exports. The UK space industry has more than 1,000 companies—these sectors are vital to the UK's growth—and it generates £79 billion turnover in a year, £46 billion of that in exports supporting over

1 million jobs across the whole of the UK. As you can see, Madam Deputy Speaker, it is a very big industry indeed.

This debate is an opportunity to highlight the Government's continued interest in the UK space sector and the ambitions to build back better following the covid-19 pandemic. People do not realise that more or less everything in our lives is affected by what goes on in space, from me sitting in my constituency making this speech, all the way through to mobile phones, technology enabling GPS satellites, and even the regulation of gas flows across the UK in certain applications. It is a huge and very complicated industry.

Recently the Government have had a lot of investment in innovation from the UK space sector. We have been at the forefront of global innovation, from sustainable fuels for rocket launchers to the next generation of earth observation. Last month, Rolls-Royce and the UK Space Agency announced that they are joining forces on unique research into how nuclear power technologies could be used to part-power space exploration. Oxfordshire-based Reaction Engines is continuing to develop a SABRE—synergetic air breathing rocket engine—for propelling both high-speed aircraft and spacecraft. Some day in the future, we will be able to fly into space. The Government recently invested £500 million in a low-earth-orbit satellite communication system, and the order books are bulging, with over £2 billion-worth of investment coming in. That shows that the UK is pushing forward on its agendas and objectives for the UK's space programme. We are definitely a big player in the space industry.

In future, we must still collaborate in the ways that we are doing, enable our terrestrial sites to have ballistic space ports as well as horizontal space tourism airspace, and hopefully give the Space Industry Act 2018 more teeth as regards dealing with the Civil Aviation Authority, which is actually stifling the space industry.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I do want hon. Members to keep an eye on the clock because we are trying to get in as many people as we can.

2.7 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD) [V]: I am absolutely delighted that the hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) has secured this debate.

As we have heard, the UK's main proposal for a vertical launch site from the UK mainland is in Sutherland in my constituency. It would be churlish of me not to thank Her Majesty's Government—the UK Government—and indeed the Scottish Government and the Minister for the work they have put into making this project come to the point that it has. Let me emphasise the massive local support in Sutherland for this project. It is enthusiastically supported. Local people see it as one way of stopping depopulation of the highlands, to which I shall return in a moment. At Dounreay in Caithness, we have a huge skills resource. It was, and still is, a nuclear facility, but it is being decommissioned. These people have tremendous skills and they must be redeployed. My ambition is to see the best-quality employment opportunities being offered to them as they leave the site in future.

We have the weather for this. We have a rail link to Thurso, which is nearby. We have a good road link up the A9. Most importantly, today the Scottish Government have confirmed that an SPO—specialised operations—

permit will be given to Wick John O' Groats airport in the next four years. That is crucially important in terms of the air link. The site has planning permission, as the hon. Member for Midlothian mentioned. A full environmental audit has been carried out. Both the UK Government and the Scottish Government have kept a close eye on all these aspects. This is massively important. As the hon. Gentleman said, if we get going with it, we will steal a march on other countries and we can do very well. It is important to be optimistic and look to the future once we get through the pandemic.

I started with thanks and I conclude with thanks—first, to Highlands and Islands Enterprise. This is a very simple equation. Making the Sutherland space launch become a reality will be a major factor in heading off our ancestral nightmare—depopulation and the prospect of highlanders, particularly the young, leaving their homeland to find work. That would be a tragedy. This project is one way of keeping the lights on in the straths and glens.

I have one final thanks—this may seem rather unusual—and it is to somebody who has actually gone out of his way to be enthusiastic about space launches from the UK: none other than the Prime Minister. When we come to the first launch, I hope that I will have the opportunity to buy him a dram. Indeed, I extend a warm welcome to all other Members to join us to watch the first rocket into space—I will pick up the bill.

2.10 pm

Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con) [V]: My hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris) is right that three minutes is not a long time to discuss the enormous potential of the UK Space Agency but, then again, it takes only two minutes and 30 seconds for a rocket to leave the earth's atmosphere, passing the Kármán line, and go into orbit, so Members can do better than that. I am proud to have been the UK's Space Minister—twice actually—between 2018 and 2020. Not only is it the best job title in Government, but my daughter used to call me the “Minister for the Universe”, confusing that with my other title of Universities Minister.

There are enormous opportunities ahead in the 2020s. As Space Minister I created the idea of the National Space Council, with the promised national space strategy that has been talked about. I also managed to deliver a record uplift in the UK's contribution to the European Space Agency—nothing to do with the EU—of £1.9 billion a year over the next four years. However, we can and must do more. I am sure that the Minister will recognise that this role is a huge opportunity for her as well.

Space is involved in every aspect of our lives. It is probably involved in this debate today, with satellites passing information back from various constituencies. The economic output for space in the UK is estimated to be £300 billion, rising to £340 billion by 2030. Worryingly, however, only 10% of that activity is actually UK owned. There is a huge issue of sovereignty that we need to tackle when it comes to the UK space industry. Ninety per cent. of our satellite activity is through foreign-owned satellites, so we need to look again at what we can deliver for the future.

As for Government investment in space, yes we are doing well, but we spend roughly £500 million a year, which is a third of the French Government's budget and

half of the German budget. When it comes to a new national space strategy and the future, we need to consider a few things. First, looking at the UK Space Agency, we need to create a separate UK space delivery agency so that the Space Agency is a commissioner that pushes through projects such as horizontal launch down in Newquay. Secondly, we need to double our space budget up to £1 billion a year. We should have a national procurement fund for space worth £250 million a year and a space innovation fund worth £150 million a year. That would ensure that the UK can really be on a par with other European nations and other countries, putting the space industry right at the centre of our vision for a new global Britain.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. We have lost the connection to John Nicolson, so we go straight to Richard Graham.

2.13 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con) [V]: Today's debate is a decade on from the space innovation and growth strategy of 2010, in which we aspired to a 10% share of a growing global sector. Today, a lot has happened, and the market has hugely grown. The Government are right, therefore, to focus on the increased market opportunities ahead.

To celebrate what has been achieved, our small satellites, led by Surrey Satellite Technology and AAC Clyde Space, have done good work around the world. For example, they have partnered with the Government of the Philippines to help their efforts at greater information for agriculture and, indeed, natural disaster awareness. Such opportunities, both environmental and security, echo across all the world's regions, with chances to boost crop production and the livelihoods associated with it, reduce deforestation and increase carbon reduction. All of that comes in the lead up to COP26, so this is an appropriate moment to discuss our role in space. Such activity could be boosted by launches in Cornwall and the Shetlands, putting us at the front of European efforts, alongside Sweden, to have launches from the continent.

Our wider role in global navigation systems, now that we have left the European Galileo project, needs to be clarified, along with the future of the UK-based European Space Agency, as the EU creates its own entity. Although we currently stand second only to the US when it comes to providing finance for space, our Government spending on R and D, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore) referred to, hardly places us in tier 2 and some way behind France and Germany.

Does this matter? My instinct is that for the UK to continue to be at the leading edge of space technology, with skills, jobs and growth benefits, we need the National Space Council to work closely with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on the strategy promised but not yet seen. I hope that will include opportunities for greater UK supply chains, as well as for how we take forward the role of OneWeb, particularly in our aims for autonomous vehicles.

We should, as a result of all these things, be looking at a future where robotics and advanced manufacturing play a key role, with finance raised from our capital markets, venture capital and other institutional funds. This will be helped by the partnership between scientists,

[Richard Graham]

technology, business, markets, the regulator and Government—exactly what has been delivered on vaccination. It is an initially surprising similarity, but, as other countries and unions have found, it is a difficult one. If the Minister and BEIS can together harness the good work of the decade-old Satellite Applications Catapult—shall we just call it the space catapult?—and the new Space Growth Partnership, we may have the vehicle to do it. With a really good regulatory policy alongside this and the best framework in the world, we will attract investment and a rocket-fuelled role for our economic recovery.

2.16 pm

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP) [V]: It has long been known that the Hebrides have a reputation for looking beyond planet Earth upwards. I am thinking of the heavens, in fact, and the Hebrides are of course very like heaven, as well you know, Madam Deputy Speaker. In the 1200s, the philosopher and theologian John Duns Scotus lived here, but in the modern age the Hebrides hold another record. In 2017, the highest and heaviest object to be launched into space was launched from the Hebrides Range in Uist. It went up to a height of 155 miles, or 250 km, which is of course about 25 times higher than commercial space flight, so we have a head start in many ways, perhaps we could say over the centuries, of looking beyond the surface of the earth. We are aware that some public funding is going to Sutherland and Cornwall. There are two other areas—in Shetland and here ourselves in the Hebrides—that would be looking to get the same sort of support, hopefully, that the Government of the UK have given to these other sites.

We also want to see some progress on the Space Industry Act 2018. While regulation is welcome, there are concerns that the licensing process may be quite a lot slower than in other nations. Already we have a site earmarked, which is called Spaceport 1, and we hope to have a sub-orbital launch facility during 2021, accelerating local jobs and bringing economic growth—much needed economic growth—to the area. We can do sun-synchronous and polar orbits, using both north and south trajectories. Access to the site does not require significant local infrastructure investment; it is just about there already. The planned use with the Ministry of Defence brings facilities, and it has the expertise to do this, because obviously, when we launched in 2017 we had that level of expertise. There will be a substantially reduced development cost by using the Hebrides, and we just hope that this will come to fruition for sub-orbital launches because it could be a win-win situation for all concerned.

The expertise and the track record of the Hebrides Range proves this can be done. There is good local backing, and good local infrastructure, from Joe MacPhee and Alison MacCorquodale at the local council, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar. There are many things just ready to go in the Hebrides for this, and, in fact, without the leg-up that other places have had, it is probably the premier spot to do this. It already has the track record, which I mentioned earlier, of the 2017 launch, and we are ready to build on that and go further. We just need to make sure that all those around us are as prepared as we are in the Hebrides to get it going, and we are looking for the UK Government to do their bit in support, and on the

legislative framework and on licensing as well, to make sure that progress comes to us to the benefit of all from these islands.

2.19 pm

Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con) [V]: I congratulate the hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) on securing this important debate on the future of the UK space industry.

My Guildford constituency is a space hotspot and is the foundation of the local space sector. Over three decades ago, Surrey Satellite Technology was formed as a spin-out company from the University of Surrey. It is still going strong today, employing 350 staff, and has achieved worldwide success in the manufacture of small satellites. From the foundations of this company in Guildford, the number of space companies and organisations in the area has grown to 185. The wider enterprise M3 local enterprise partnership area has recently become the only LEP to have been recognised by the UK Space Agency for its rich potential. It has received an award of £70,000 for activities to stimulate further growth.

Continued investment in the sector is vital, when we think about what a company such as Surrey Satellite Technology has achieved. This includes 69 satellites launched in the last four decades and space development and training programmes for international customers, including the US, Kazakhstan, Nigeria, Chile, Thailand and South Korea. I know that the Minister will recognise how important the sector is for our exports and future trading relationship with partners all over the world.

Government plans for an ambitious national technology satellite programme are extremely welcome. A long-term co-ordinated plan would allow industry to invest in developing new technologies in projects that play to the UK's strengths, fostering innovation, economic growth and inspiring young people into science, technology, engineering and maths careers. Speaking of those careers, I am pleased to hear that Surrey Satellites offers an apprenticeship programme and a graduate scheme. Along with Surrey Satellites, the space sector in Guildford is the proud home to Lime Microsystems, MTS, Ricardo, SATRO, Thomson Environmental Consultants, Eosense, DMC International Imaging and the British Association of Remote Sensing Companies.

As I was growing up, I was not one to spend my time gazing at the stars. I was more interested in people, the choices we make and how we live our lives, but I think we can all recognise that many of the things that we use and take for granted are the result of research and innovation in the space sector—google it and the list is endless. We can be proud of our UK space industry and, with the focus of this Government, I believe that we can be assured of its future success.

2.22 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): The value of the UK space industry has more than trebled since 2010 and impacts on our daily lives, including the TV we watch, GPS navigation in our cars, and the covid apps on our mobile phones. While these services are delivered by large equatorial satellites, the UK would be likely to specialise in launching small, low-orbit satellites that are used for Earth observation, such as weather patterns, signs of climate damage or tracking shipping.

Scotland is a major player, with almost a fifth of UK space sector employees. Glasgow is the leading producer of micro-satellites, while Strathclyde, Glasgow and Edinburgh universities have innovative research departments. Scottish companies, such as Skyrora and Orbex, are already developing commercial launch vehicles and both have produced low-carbon fuels to minimise their climate impact. Scotland also hosts five of the seven potential spaceports, including Prestwick airport in my constituency. Prestwick already has many advantages as a horizontal launch spaceport, with a 3 km runway, clear weather, good transport links and Scotland's largest aerospace campus.

The UK space industry is currently held back by the lack of a domestic launch site, but the licensing and regulation system of the Space Industry Act 2018 is still not finalised. The industry is concerned about the technology safeguarding agreement with the US, which could exclude foreign-launched customers from UK spaceports. It would be a failure if they just ended up as long strips of tarmac awaiting the occasional visit of a US vehicle.

The biggest unresolved issue is that companies must accept unlimited liability to indemnify the Government against third-party damage. This is disproportionate, as small satellites would largely burn up on re-entry. Without a cap on liability, though, it is impossible to get insurance, and this is already driving some micro-satellite companies out of the UK. There is also concern at the lack of consultation on moving regulation from the UK Space Agency to the Civil Aviation Authority, especially as the latter has its hands full with taking on aviation safety after Brexit.

It is critical that spaceports stimulate the whole sector, with a boost to research, innovation and manufacturing, and that they inspire more young people to go into the sector. The most important requirement is an overall space strategy so that the opportunities of this global industry are not missed.

2.25 pm

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con) [V]: It is a privilege to contribute to this debate. I look forward to hearing the Minister sum up, because I wish to put a number of points directly to her.

Moray is not going to be home to a spaceport, but we have heard about other potential locations here in Scotland, particularly in the north of Scotland, from the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), who has been an advocate for the Sutherland centre, and I am sure we will hear later from the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) about the plans up there.

Nevertheless, Moray is part of the process, particularly as it is home to Orbex. I have visited Orbex at the enterprise centre just outside Forres and was immensely impressed by the work there to be part of the UK's space plans. It is great that Orbex is making high-value, high-invested jobs available here in Moray to develop and work with the Sutherland space centre. The jobs are greatly appreciated by the local community.

Chris Larmour, who heads Orbex in Moray, has been in constant dialogue with me about how we can continue to promote the company and its benefits here in Moray and about what Moray can offer as a base to Orbex and its teams. Chris was hopeful that I could put some

points to the Minister and I agreed to set out some of his queries. He is looking for the Government to assist in the overcoming of any obstacles to the delivery of the Sutherland spaceport in Scotland, thereby helping to deliver hundreds of jobs and significant new economic benefit to the Moray region. Will the Minister look into what the UK Government can do to overcome any obstacles to the delivery of the Sutherland spaceport? Will the Government also consider working towards the development of reciprocal rights to launch UK rockets from American spaceports? That is another key issue for companies such as Orbex.

It is great that Scotland and Moray are leading Europe in the space sector through companies like Orbex, which has received strong support for an environmentally sustainable launch system from the UK Space Agency, the European Space Agency and private venture capital funds. This is a great news story not only for those parts of Scotland and the United Kingdom that will have spaceports, but for constituents such as mine here in Moray who can provide so much support and so many benefits to spaceports and to the local economy where they are based. We are delighted to have Orbex, providing high-quality jobs here in Moray, and I know that Orbex will appreciate the support of the UK Government and, in particular, responses to the points I have raised with the Minister.

2.28 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP) [V]: I declare at the outset: I am a member and officer of the all-party parliamentary group on space, like some other Members who have spoken.

One highlight of my political career was the opportunity to meet Major Tim Peake—indeed, I have met him twice—shortly after which I was able to get his biography, which is one of the best reads about the impact that space can have on an individual's life. It challenges young people in particular never to be afraid to ask the necessary questions. Indeed, I believe that that book should be on the national reading curriculum for schools, because it really encourages young people to gain knowledge of space and understand how space can contribute in so many different ways to the nation's wellbeing. Major Tim Peake is an inspirational character and we are very fortunate, as a nation, to have him.

I also wish to mention Airbus's role. It employs more people in the UK space programme than the US aerospace and prime defence companies combined. The United Kingdom is actually at the cutting edge of a lot to do with space but probably does not blow its own trumpet sufficiently well to promote what it does.

Northern Ireland plays its part in the space sector. Its strategy supports the growth of the UK space sector by exploiting key upstream resources and developing world-class space downstream capabilities. Northern Ireland's regional aerospace cluster contributes £1.3 billion to the overall UK aerospace industry, making it Europe's eighth largest aerospace region in revenue terms, and its innovative and skilled companies are involved in every major aircraft programme globally. Northern Ireland's space strategy programme contributes well above its weight.

Not enough is said about how space is a distinct opportunity for UK leadership on the world stage. Indeed, it underpins the ability to enable ambitious diplomatic, security and prosperity objectives. In security alone,

[*Ian Paisley*]

90% of Ministry of Defence capability is dependent in some way on our space programme. On prosperity, space technologies underpin £300 billion per annum to the UK economy, making this a massive programme. In diplomacy, space brings £150 million in official development assistance to more than 40 countries. We have before us an opportunity to build our space programmes, invest in our National Space Academy and make sure that space is the future for the UK.

2.31 pm

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con) [V]: May I thank the hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) for securing this debate? It is important for many reasons, not least because the space sector provides an opportunity for significant post-covid growth, and indeed growth that features high levels of productivity. A report by the London School of Economics showed that small and medium-sized enterprises in the sector are growing by more than 30% per annum. The UK is already a world leader in space science, in producing small satellites, and utilising space data; and as part of the Government's strategy of achieving 10% of the global space market share by 2030, it has been decided that we also need to focus on space launch services. We have the suppliers and the customers; now we need the infrastructure, the equipment and the services to bring them together in the launch sector. But I ask the Minister: are we pursuing our 10% market share goal with sufficient purpose and are we prioritising the areas that will bring the biggest benefits? The largest value sub-sector of launch services, the design and manufacturing of rockets, has so far received the lowest amount of support funding from the UK launch programme. Only one UK launch vehicle company has benefited from the "LaunchUK programme, whereas seven spaceport sites have already received support.

We have heard a lot in the mainstream press about spaceports; they are, after all, a prerequisite for the UK's launch ambitions and critical national infrastructure. However, the breakdown of the value of each launch will see spaceports gaining fees of about 2% of the total value of a launch, which compares with the launch vehicle representing more than 60%; we are talking about a difference of thousands versus millions of pounds. It is therefore clear that the UK should be doing all it can to gain this value of the upstream space market. To be clear: if another nation launches its rockets from our spaceport, we get thousands, but they get millions. The benefits of supporting more than one domestic rocket company would be immense in terms of new jobs, productivity, growth in skills, technology and benefits to UK supply chains.

However, it is not too late to correct the balance. A company in my constituency, Raptor Aerospace, is developing the next generation of suborbital launch vehicles. Yes, in among the golden waves of North Norfolk's finest agriculture, a company is designing and building rockets to access space—it is one of only three significant home-grown rocket companies. Raptor is a start-up that has doubled in size in the past 12 months, and it will grow faster still in 2021. The company has developed a unique hybrid rocket engine facility in the east of England, and the company's trajectory will see the launch of a development rocket from a UK spaceport later this year, with a commercial space-capable rocket

the following year. We have brave companies such as Raptor Aerospace that are willing to take the first steps. We must rely on them and the advantage of the synchronicity and the boost that developing launch capability can provide for all the UK.

2.34 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD) [V]: It is a pleasure to take part in today's debate, because if someone had told the eight-year-old me who was allowed to get up in the middle of the night to watch Neil Armstrong walk on the moon that I would one day be discussing the prospect of a spaceport in Scotland—of the UK grabbing 10% of the global space market by the end of the decade—would I have believed them? I suspect I probably would, because it was only in January 1961 that Kennedy promised to send a man to the moon and back safely by the end of the decade, and it was achieved in 1969. Perhaps the biggest thing that space exploration has given us is instilling the belief in an entire generation that anything is possible. I am sure the scientists who hon. Members have mentioned were inspired by that in different ways. We have already grasped more than 5% of the available space market, but we must harness that spirit of belief to achieve our goal of 10%.

While I am immensely proud of what is being achieved in Edinburgh, I am confident that scientists there and across the country would agree that a spaceport in Scotland, particularly, would be invaluable to the continued growth of the industry. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) for his work in supporting the development of this project by Highlands and Islands Enterprise—a project that is so important to all of us. Like Dounreay and the University of the Highlands and Islands before it, it attacks a major issue that has blighted this area of the country, the highlands, and in fact many areas of Scotland: lack of employment and an absolute absence of opportunity for young people. More than 10 years ago, as an employee of Highlands and Islands Enterprise, we carried out a survey that found that the majority of young people felt there was no career for them in the highlands.

This is where a space programme can help so many young people. It can create revenue, reverse economic decline, and give young people opportunities. We should do everything we can to ensure that girls and young women are encouraged to be part of it from the beginning, and I make no apology for saying it is a prime example of something that demonstrates the benefits of working together across the United Kingdom. The space programme gives us the power to do wonderful things for this country, and we should harness that. We should have a fund dedicated to British entrepreneurs entering the space industry. It should include groundbreaking research projects and a strong, nationwide supply chain, harnessing the almost unrivalled power of British engineering. Communities across the country are crying out for investment, and I believe this is the industry that can do it—that can build a better country for the future.

2.37 pm

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con) [V]: I am hugely proud to have Harwell Campus in my constituency for all sorts of reasons, but one of them is its space cluster. It has 105 organisations working on space, which is the

largest number of organisations within walking distance of each other anywhere in the world. We have a whole range of organisations, from industry and academia to Government, working together, such as RAL Space—which is building the national satellite test facility that will enable companies to build the next generation of spacecraft and test them in the UK—and Astroscale, which works on sweeping the estimated 170 million items of space debris so that we can have a more sustainable space.

If most people were asked to envisage space, I imagine they would think of astronauts and spacecraft making landings, but as has been touched on, space affects a whole range of the challenges we are facing, from our understanding of diseases to our efforts on climate change. MDA at Harwell developed the new module that was recently installed on the International Space Station, allowing its crew to send the results of their experiments to Earth much faster to aid our understanding of ageing, Parkinson's, cancer and a whole range of other things. Then there are companies such as Rezitech, whose technology enables us to monitor water pipes that might be at risk of bursting and threats to our forests.

There is lots being learned at Harwell, and in my three minutes, I want to touch on four important things. The first is the importance of our small and medium enterprises: we have great SMEs with real expertise, and when they work together in a cluster, we can multiply their impact. The second is the importance of the commitment from Government, which is why I think the national space strategy is so important: it will encourage companies to make commitments that they would not otherwise make without that assurance.

The third is inspiring the next generation to want to work in space. Thales Alenia Space has a great Mars balloon programme that allows young people to build experiments in Kinder-like eggs and send them to a 30 km altitude, so that they can mimic the atmosphere of Mars and hopefully be inspired to want to work in this area in the future.

The fourth and final one is ambition. Everything involving space involves ambition, and I am hugely pleased with the Government's ambition to have 10% of the global space industry by 2030. That cascades through to companies such as Oxford Space Systems, which wants to be the global leader for its deployable antenna. With that ambition, the commitment from Government and the work at Harwell, we might even exceed that 10%, but we will certainly continue to punch above our weight.

2.40 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD) [V]: It is exciting to watch the way in which the UK space industry is currently growing, but it is worth remembering that the roots of that growth are to be found in the civil space strategy of 2012 to 2016, which was launched by the then Minister for Universities and Science, David Willetts. I want briefly to remind the House of what David Willetts said in the foreword to that strategy:

“The possibilities of the next fifty years represent something very inspiring for this country. Our pragmatic approach to private and public sector partnerships has helped pave the way for a new era of space activity in Britain, with the UK Space Agency leading the way. So, a strategy is more than simply words. A strategy can shape the future.”

Indeed, it does.

The progress we have seen since then has brought us to the point in Shetland where we are proud to be home to the burgeoning and ever-growing Shetland spaceport in Unst, the most northerly of the Shetland islands. Last year, we were delighted to welcome the partnership between Unst and Lockheed Martin as the preferred site for its UK Pathfinder launch operation. We hope to hear further information soon with regard to its future intentions. Just this week, we were delighted to hear the announcement of the intention of HyImpulse, a German company, to launch its maiden orbital flight from Unst in 2023.

The question is, how do we go forward? That takes me back to David Willetts's words. We were dismayed to read recently in *The Press and Journal* that the view of Scottish Minister Fiona Hyslop is that the Sutherland site is best placed to achieve the first launch by the target date of next year. There are opportunities for all the communities involved in the growth of the UK space sector, and that was a rather bold and ill-considered assertion. It does not help anyone for the Scottish Government to be seen to favour one site over another.

As we look for a way forward, I take the Minister back again to the words of David Willetts and encourage her to build the strongest possible engagement with the companies that are doing business in this sector—they are the ones that know it best—rather than relying on information from politicians or public sector agencies, who may occasionally have an axe to grind. The Government have work aplenty to do in creating a fresh regulatory framework. Let us leave the commercial decisions to the companies that know best and that will put their money where their mouths are.

2.43 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con) [V]: I welcome the Government's ambition to have 10% of the global space industry in the UK. It is right that we aim to be a significant player in this increasingly important global sector. However, in order to achieve that aim, we will need to have a launch capability here in the UK. We lead the world in the design and manufacture of satellites—particularly small satellites—but we currently then ship them to the other side of the world for launch. Having our own launch capability in the UK will not only be important in an ever more uncertain world but will reduce costs and the environmental impact.

Cornwall is ready to play a major part in this through Spaceport Cornwall. Based at Newquay airport in my constituency, it will be one of the world's first horizontal launch sites for satellites. Horizontal launch has many advantages over vertical launch, as it requires far less infrastructure, has a smaller carbon footprint and is much more accessible for smaller satellites. Cornwall has been chosen as the ideal site for horizontal launch and things are progressing well. With the successful first satellite launch of our partners Virgin Orbit last month, we are now in a position to launch satellites from Cornwall next year. That will bring much-needed well-paid jobs to Cornwall and attract business investment, which will aid the Government's levelling-up agenda in one of the poorest parts of the UK. It will also help to inspire our young people to pursue qualifications in STEM subjects and open up career opportunities in electronics and engineering.

[Steve Double]

The thing we need now is for the regulations to be put in place. We need them in place urgently in order to be able to obtain the necessary licences. There is concern, however, that the regulations are looking to take a one-size-fits-all approach for both vertical and horizontal launch. Those two means of launch are very different. Horizontal launch, which is basically little different from a large passenger jet taking off, until it reaches altitude for rocket launch, should not be bogged down by unnecessary regulations that are required only to cover vertical launch. Will the Minister therefore look carefully at the regulations to ensure that they differentiate between launch mechanisms and are fit for horizontal launch?

In June this year, Cornwall will host the G7 leaders' summit, and we are keen to use the opportunity to showcase the UK and Cornwall's space sector ambitions. To do that, we would like to bring the Virgin Orbit plane, Cosmic Girl, to Cornwall for the G7. Will the Minister work with Spaceport Cornwall to do all we can to enable that to happen?

2.46 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) and congratulate him on setting the scene so well.

The Government's target of 10% of the global space market by 2030 is something we all want to see. The latest figures, from the "Size and Health of the UK Space Industry 2018" survey, show:

"Total UK space industry income grew to £14.8 billion in 2016/17",

which is estimated to represent

"5.1% of the global space economy".

These are lofty goals, yet seeing the skill levels of workers in our nation—for example, the workers in the Shorts, formerly Bombardier, factories in my constituency and their ability to turn their hands and machinery to new complex designs—I sincerely believe those goals to be achievable. Many independent engineering firms in my constituency, such as Cooke Brothers, Huddleston and others, are ready, skilled, able and willing to turn their hand to this and to be part of the achievement in the space industry. We need, however, to be able to connect the design firm in Bristol with engineering firms in the Ards peninsula, or Newtownards town in Strangford. There is a job to be done to ensure that the UK-wide skills are utilised for the benefit of us all and that everyone gains in this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

The majority of the income of the space industry—£12.4 billion—is generated by the downstream segment of the industry through space applications such as direct-to-home broadcasting. Upstream activities, including space manufacturing—launch vehicles, satellites, payloads, scientific instruments—generated an income of £2.4 billion in 2016-17. When we achieve our goal of doubling the UK share of the global industry, it will allow other areas, such as my constituency of Strangford, to come into their own and to play their part. I want to see us all gain in this great nation and to see the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy take an active role to make the connections and to support diversification of facilities UK-wide to be part of the growing global potential.

I was heartened to hear this quotation from Dr Michael McKay, the head of the strategy and co-ordination office in the directorate of operations at the European Space Agency:

"Northern Ireland possesses the high precision engineering expertise, research competence and innovative thinking that is necessary to meet the demands of tomorrow's European and International Space Programmes and their application. Clearly identifying the opportunities where we can use these skills is the key to growth".

Let us not lose that comment. We need to utilise that. I sincerely look to the Minister to understand how Northern Ireland will play an integral part in this tremendous opportunity for everyone.

2.49 pm

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): The morning after I was appointed

the science Minister, and two years later Business Secretary, my very first engagement was to meet all the representatives of the UK's space sector at the Farnborough airshow. I did so because I was convinced right from the outset that this was an industry where we could forge a very strong future for the UK. It was an opportunity—technologically, in engineering terms, economically, regionally and scientifically—from which we could prosper.

One thing we know, looking ahead to the future, is that the whole world is going to be using more satellites and more satellite technology, whether for monitoring crops or helping to navigate autonomous vehicles around our streets. Because our skills in all the related disciplines, from precision engineering to the analysis of big data, are so well developed and so profound, this is a huge opportunity for us. When we launched the industrial strategy, we reserved a very big place within it for space and satellites for that reason. Two of the major components of that industrial strategy were the national satellite test facility that my hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (David Johnston) referred to and the competition to have satellite launch facilities. As we have heard in this debate, if we are going to build the technology, how much better it is to be able to launch satellites as well.

The Space Industry Act went through the House at that time, through the industrial strategy. It was an exciting time for an exciting sector, but I have to say in all candour that I am concerned that, in recent months and years, the Government seem to have been a bit more ambivalent about industrial strategy than I think is appropriate given the opportunities. In the 2017 industrial strategy, we thought that we should have capacity for vaccines manufacture so we established a vaccines manufacturing and innovation centre. We thought that we should have capability in battery manufacturing; we established a Faraday challenge. We established the initiatives that we have today.

I hope that, in the months ahead, the Government might reflect that, although not everything about that strategy was right, to have a forward plan—bringing industry, academia and places all together to work together to put the whole weight of the country behind that—is a recipe for success. It is not too late to do that, but other countries are looking at the same possibilities that we have. So I hope the Minister and the new Secretary of State will take up with enthusiasm the potential of industrial strategy once again.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Due to the pressures on time, Mark Garnier will be the last speaker before the Front Benchers.

2.52 pm

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con) [V]: Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. I draw Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as well as my role as an officer of the all-party group on space.

I think we would all agree that space is absolutely fantastic and fascinating for our country. We are a nation with global ambitions and it is an absolutely basic part of our global nation's portfolio. We would all agree that we need to engage and do well in this sector. Since 2010 it has been our ambition to achieve 10% of the global space market, a win worth around £40 billion a year. As we have just heard, that was reinforced with the industrial strategy. This is a fine ambition, but it is just that: an ambition. It does not really constitute a grand strategy or a strategic goal.

I fear that we have lost our way; the reality is that we are not driving forward this ambition in the way we should be. While we are the sixth biggest defence economy on the planet, our space sector is now languishing behind that of Italy in its activities, and although we have any number of brilliant companies here in the UK engaged in this sector, international companies seeking to locate here are faced with an extraordinarily confused regulatory landscape. We have an incredibly untidy, confusing regulatory landscape with various Government Departments looking after various parts of this regime. Our new regulatory regime brought in under the Space Industry Act 2018 faces any number of problems and confusions. In addition, no one really quite understands why flight licensing has been transferred from the UK Space Agency to the Civil Aviation Authority. Even at its most basic level, we are failing so many businesses seeking to invest in the UK because we have failed to deliver a simple customer service proposition.

While it is easy to criticise a lot of the details of the space offering, I do not want to pour cold water on what we do, but our problem is that we do not have a grand strategy. We seem to lack the clarity of vision that supports the delivery of this very important sector.

The reality is that space is a component of our national power. If we want to be a global military presence, we need to have a global space presence. If we want to be a global technology leader, we need to be a global space leader. If we want to avoid the same problems that we have faced with Huawei and 5G but in space, we need to grasp the technological nettle.

We need to recognise that our space landscape is unfathomably complex and impossible to navigate. We need to develop a strategy that will make all of this work. We need to have a proper secretariat that is empowered to deliver a cohesive and coherent space policy, and that can be effective across Government. We need to create the opportunity in other areas that will be able to support our commercial space industry, and we need to do well in academia. But we also need to look at one of the greatest resources we have in this country: the City of London.

We need to come up with a three-point strategy: create a proper strategic goal that embodies our true global Britain vision in space; build a structure with a clear delivery organisation at its head; and incentivise

other brilliant sectors of the economy, especially financial services, to become a world leader in supporting our space sector.

2.55 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP) [V]: I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) for bringing forward this important debate. I also declare an interest as a vice-chair of the parliamentary space committee.

Over the last decade, the space industry has become one of the UK's fastest-growing sectors. It currently employs almost 42,000 people and generates £15 billion annually. In Scotland, we are rightly proud of our thriving space industry. Three miles from where I am sitting is the heart of Europe's small satellite industry, and Scotland's space port sites offer great potential—it was good to hear from so many Members who represent those sites this afternoon. Glasgow University and Strathclyde University are training future space physicists and engineers, and the Scottish physics curriculum has been tailored towards space.

Many Members have spoken enthusiastically about the space industry this afternoon, but enthusiasm alone will not enable the industry to exploit its full potential. In the UK there is a lack of leadership and co-ordination between the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Ministry of Defence. Other countries—notably the US, China and India—are developing space technologies as a fourth arm of their armed forces. So the first priority for the UK is to have a credible space strategy that makes long-term investment possible.

It is also important to recognise that space is set to get crowded. Anywhere humanity goes, we take our ambitions and rivalries, and space is no different. The national and commercial race for space power and profit is back, and many are seeing the economic potential and defence necessities in space-based capabilities. Just to illustrate that, SpaceX has launched 1,000 new satellites in the last year alone. In this crowded commercial domain, companies will launch according to where the regulations are most supportive of the industry.

So where does that leave the UK? Well, there are a number of issues that we need to address. The licensing requirements under the Space Industry Act 2018 include complex regulation that must be simplified to avoid large administrative costs for licence applicants. The third-party liability insurance costs are a major challenge for small satellite operators. These costs are excessively high and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) has already explained, disproportionate to the low risks associated with this class of satellite.

Currently, one company is leaving the UK every month to launch elsewhere, and many more are electing not to come to the UK in the first place. This threatens the future of the UK's small satellite sector and its wider supply chain, which needs focused Government support. A new insurance model is required for UK companies to remain competitive in the global market, and for the Government to leverage its space sector investments, including in launch sites and manufacturing facilities. The UK has a well-established earth observation capability, but there is growing competition. Other companies have significant national programmes and clear earth observation data and security policies, which

[Carol Monaghan]

enable greater investment certainty. Data exporters from the UK are disadvantaged because of the lack of such a policy, so that needs to be looked at urgently. As others have mentioned, the technology safeguard agreement between the US and the UK was entered into last June without consultation or scrutiny. That could be unreasonably restrictive to members of the UK industry, for example, if a company were to obtain a component from a country outside the missile technology control regime. It may also prevent companies from other countries coming to the UK to use launch facilities.

For informed policy to be developed—a policy that supports the industry—there must be suitably experienced regulatory staff to allow informed decisions to be made that take into account the global nature of the industry and enable UK operators to compete in this crowded global environment. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy drives innovation that is critical for other sectors and has an invaluable contribution to make to global challenges, such as climate change. We do have a thriving sector, but now we must develop a clear strategy with a supportive licensing policy to ensure that our ambitions are realised and our launch capability becomes a reality.

3.1 pm

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab) [V]: I thank the hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) and the Backbench Business Committee for bringing forward this very important debate today. There have been so many excellent and well-informed contributions from all parts of the House and I am sorry that I cannot do them justice in my comments, but I will try to emulate their conciseness.

Space and its many unanswered questions inspire awe and excitement. For nearly 70 years, the official British space programme has been seeking to answer the big questions of our universe, drawing on the expertise of our world-leading science and research sectors. In fact, the British Interplanetary Society is the oldest space advocacy organisation on Earth. As a nation, we have a proud history of space exploration and international collaboration. In 1957, British Skylark rockets were launched from Woomera in Australia. At the turn of the millennium, the British National Space Centre was the third largest financial contributor to the European Space Agency.

The space industry is worth more than £14.8 billion per year and has grown five times greater than the wider economy since 1999. The success of this sector helps to drive prosperity across the UK. As we have heard, our UK space businesses spend around £750 million annually, with around 1,500 UK suppliers, based across every region of the UK. Many of the jobs created in space manufacturing are also highly productive, with the average salary of an Airbus UK space employee standing at £51,000, nearly 50% higher than the UK national average.

The UK's proud history in space exploration, research and development makes it an excellent launch pad for future growth, with the right leadership. The UK and its place in the world is changing. We have left the European Union, which meant turning our back on the Galileo project that we did so much to bring about, at a

cost of £1.2 billion to the taxpayer. The Government then U-turned on their plans to develop a rival sovereign satellite system, at a cost of a further £60 million.

Just this weekend, it was reported that the Secretary of State had decided to take control of strategy and policy away from the UK Space Agency, handing the almost £600 million budget directly to the Government. We are concerned that this constitutes a reactionary power grab following the controversy over the Government's acquisition of OneWeb. Will the Minister publish the information that drove this decision, and set out the new remit for the UK Space Agency? What will she do with these new powers?

The Government talk excitedly about “global Britain”, but Labour wants to see an interplanetary Britain powered by a booming space sector. Space is not just for the stars. As we have heard, it impacts every household in the country—from climate change and rural broadband to transport and agriculture. From our smart phones to our credit cards, the UK space sector helps us all to prosper. The Government have made commitments to develop a new space command, designed to “enhance the breadth of our space capabilities” and help to fund high-risk/reward innovation projects, but there has been no clarity on the support provided to space research from this new ARPA-style moonshot programme.

Without a clear long-term space strategy, the hard work of our space sector—in developing spaceports and rocket launch pads, and space domain awareness projects and military-grade software, and embarking on satellite projects critical for our vital infrastructure—will not be fully realised. If we are to ensure the success of these programmes, we must understand whether we have the industrial capability to do so. Part of unlocking the potential of our space industry is knowing how we organise our industrial base to achieve our goals, and in turn where we will need further investment and finance to encourage outward investment in UK businesses.

There is no strategy for external investment, no strategy for skills—in particular diverse skills; space requires everyone, regardless of gender, ethnicity, region or age—no strategy for industry and manufacturing, and no strategy for sovereign satellite capabilities, or whether and how we will compete with SpaceX and others. Instead, we have the manifesto of a Government with their head in the clouds. Down on earth, as we have heard, the sector is still waiting to hear about the future of the new regulations introduced under the Space Industry Act 2018, particularly those dealing with administrative burdens and liabilities.

Nothing better illustrates the lack of strategy and transparency than the purchase of OneWeb, despite the advice of experts and the concerns of the UK Space Agency. First we were told it would be part of our sovereign GNSS—global navigation satellite system—programme, then it was not. We do not know what the Government have planned for OneWeb or whether this huge investment will even support jobs in the UK space sector, with the satellites continuing to be manufactured in Florida.

The space sector provides the UK with so many opportunities to grow our economy, push technological boundaries and boost our soft power by developing strategic interdependence with our allies. What discussions has the Minister had about progressive partnerships in space exploration and research and development?

A year ago, UKspace set out the urgent need for a coherent cross-Government space strategy. We still have not seen it. Labour would seek to support our sovereign capability in the space age and build on the UK's proud history of technological innovation and space exploration. Labour is passionate about the long-term future and potential of the space sector. It provides high-skill, high-paid jobs, which are needed to address the major challenges of our time, but the absence of a clear and focused long-term space strategy raises many questions about how far we will benefit from the boundless possibilities of space.

3.8 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Amanda Solloway): I congratulate the hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) on securing this incredibly important debate and acknowledge the richness of this entire debate—there really are just far too many comments that I would like to make. I have been hearing words such as “opportunity”, “future”, “growth”, “jobs”, “inspiration”, “economic recovery”, “connectability”. All of these are just so exciting, and it is the reason why we really need to focus on the space industry.

To highlight just a couple of Members—there are too many to mention, although every Member has made such a valuable contribution—my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore) talked about being Minister for the Universe. I think that is really exciting; I am the Minister for the Universe now. That is so great, and I could not agree more about making sure we seize this opportunity. The hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) talked about Tim Peake and the inspiration he can bring. I was really fortunate over Christmas to receive one of the books that so inspired him. That is the kind of thing we need to harness and capture.

Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con): On the subject of inspiration, I am sure the Minister will agree with me that we have the opportunity to inspire a generation of children. As an example, as I walked to the Chamber earlier for this debate, I received a voicemail from my boy enthusiastically explaining a new fact that he had learned about a comet. It is that kind of enthusiasm that we need to inspire among a whole generation, to take our education and our industry through to the next generation.

Amanda Solloway: I thank my hon. Friend. I know his son Freddie, and wow! That is what we have to do: inspire future generations.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) talked about Neil Armstrong landing on the moon. I remember that, and I remember thinking how important—how amazing—all these achievements were. Finally, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) talked about how we must plan for our future. I am grateful for all those contributions, which were all valuable.

We must use space every single hour of every single day, and that is what makes it so exciting. From getting the latest weather forecast to navigating the oceans and operating the National Grid, satellites keep our troops safe, underpin every financial transaction and help scientists monitor our climate. Space innovations can and have

transformed how we live and work, from automated cars to wearable technology, while space science helps us to understand our place in the universe and protect our future.

As I speak, British satellites are capturing high-resolution images around the globe to help us assess environmental hazards, manage natural resources and understand our climate. British technology is on the way to Mercury—gosh, that is incredible—making possible the European Space Agency's first mission to study how the planet closest to the sun was formed. That is really amazing.

Satellites have kept our families, communities and businesses connected this past year, while space-powered technologies such as drones have supported the incredible efforts of our NHS, as was acknowledged by the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford). That includes enabling my 86-year-old dad in Wales to watch this speech today.

The Government's partnership with our inspirational space sector has been at the heart of its success. Our space growth partnerships bring together the UK's space industry, research base and Government to drive our ambitions forward, and will help us build back from the challenges of the pandemic better and stronger than ever.

We have established a new National Space Council to co-ordinate space policy. We will grow our space economy across the Union, bolster our capabilities to protect the UK and our allies, foster innovation, and make the UK a world-class destination for global talent and investment. The UK's priority for space will be set out in the first comprehensive space strategy, which will be delivered in the next six months. I could not agree more that we need that.

Our free trade agreement with the EU, worth £668 billion, is a vital step, allowing the UK to remain at the forefront of this high-tech industry. It paves the way for the UK to remain in the Copernicus programme, where there will be opportunities for UK businesses to bid for high-value manufacturing work and access satellite data, on which we will build science and commercial applications.

Outside the EU, our £374 million annual investment in the European Space Agency is ensuring that UK scientists and engineers take lead roles in this decade's most exciting missions, from building Europe's next Mars Rover to searching for life on other planets and studying the sun in greater detail than ever. We are investing in new international partnerships that will boost UK space exports and strengthen our collaboration on ground-breaking science and research with other leading space nations, such as the US, Australia and Japan.

We are also establishing major new national programmes to build the space capabilities that are vital to our prosperity and security. Our space-based positioning, navigation and timing programme is exploring new ways to ensure continued delivery of satellite navigation and timing services that are critical for UK energy networks and communications in the maritime, aviation and defence sectors, all of which we have heard about throughout this incredible debate.

We plan to make the UK a global hub for space innovation. We have launched a £15 million national space innovation programme, the UK's first dedicated fund for pioneering space technologies, which will help solve some of the greatest societal challenges. Our

[Amanda Solloway]

strategic investment in the OneWeb satellite communication constellation demonstrates the Government's ambition to put Britain at the cutting edge of the latest advances in space technology. Access to our own global fleet of satellites has the potential to connect people worldwide, creating jobs and building on a strong advanced manufacturing service base. Our aim is to be the first country in Europe to launch small satellites.

We have kickstarted work to build the first UK spaceports, including in Scotland, supported by grants worth £40 million. We expect the first launches from 2022, creating hundreds of secure, highly skilled jobs. To ensure that the UK's launch offer is competitive and encourages new market entrants, the UK Government are putting in place a world-leading regulatory framework, with the Civil Aviation Authority assuming responsibility for the regulatory functions of the Space Industry Act, in addition to regulating orbital activities under the Outer Space Act 1986.

We are working with our partners in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland to build their local strengths and drive development of their sectors. Government initiatives will join and complement our existing areas of strength as part of our developing national space ecosystem, unlocking new talent and making a career in space a realistic prospect in every part of the country.

We have a truly vibrant space sector, which stretches across the nation, going further to ensure that our space industry benefits from every region. We must seize this moment and deliver.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the future of the UK space industry.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): We will have a two-minute suspension to make the necessary arrangements for the next business.

3.15 pm

Sitting suspended.

Towns Fund

3.17 pm

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con) [R]: I beg to move, That this House has considered the Towns Fund.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing this debate. The United Kingdom is full of hard-working, innovative, entrepreneurial people. We are the fifth-biggest economy in the world, and we are a liberal, free, open and successful economy. A great number of my constituents have good jobs based in London, but lots do not, and many have been left behind, in a rich country like ours, even in good times of growth. It is therefore time to invest in our towns and cities that do not or cannot benefit from London. That is why all Members should welcome promises to level up and unleash the economic potential of towns, cities and rural places across the country. That is why all Members should welcome the towns fund.

The fund will invest £3.6 billion into places like Peterborough, Blackpool, Barrow, Torquay, Darlington, Norwich and Warrington. It will more than pay for itself by stimulating economic growth with a focus on regeneration, improved transport, better broadband connectivity, skills and culture. The plan is to unleash the economic potential of 101 towns and cities across the UK. The towns fund has the potential to change lives.

I want to illustrate the benefits of the towns fund by informing the House about how it will benefit Peterborough. The bid for investment in Peterborough is one of the first seven successful bids as part of phase 1. We have already had £1 million for a shovel-ready local growth project to support 14 parks across the city, but it will deliver nearly £23 million of investment for my city overall. Many other cities and bids are looking to Peterborough to see how we were successful. Where Peterborough leads, other towns and cities follow.

I pay tribute to Matthew Bradbury of the Nene Park Trust, the chair of the towns fund bid, Andy Starnes of CityFibre, the vice-chair, and all those who served on the towns fund board. That board includes councillors and officers from Peterborough City Council and me. I also serve on the board, and that is what makes the towns fund different. It is different not only because the Government believe in the economic potential of these towns and cities, but because Members of this House have been invited to be personally involved in the projects and personally associated with their success or, indeed, failure. We are accountable to the electorate and can hold Ministers to account.

Together with my hon. Friend the Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Mr Vara), who represents the southern part of Peterborough, we have lobbied for and supported the bid from day 1. I am sure that is true for many other Members. The funding will create a new library and a cultural hub on Bridge Street and a centre for lifelong learning, as well as feed into the new skills and the technical university that we are building, bringing highly paid jobs back to our city centre. It will give the impetus for the new developments of the station quarter and north Westgate. It will pump money into Lincoln Road, a vibrant high street in Peterborough that just needs focus, investment and, dare I say it, a little bit of love.

In the words of one local restaurant owner, Zillur Hussain, the fund is a fresh start for Peterborough that builds on our natural advantages, as we are only 40 minutes from London on the main road and rail arteries. We have a history of manufacturing, engineering, science and technology, and we have a wonderful, hard-working, skilful population. This fund is the shot in the arm that will unleash our potential.

The fund will benefit communities across the country and Members across this House. It should not be a partisan political issue. It is a shame that some Opposition Members have sought to make it political, instead of welcoming investment in their constituencies, and I hope that does not happen in this debate.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Given that 60 of the 61 towns allocated funding were Conservative-held or Conservative target seats, surely it is the hon. Gentleman's party that has made it party political.

Paul Bristow: As I understand it, 101 areas could benefit from that investment. If the Labour party had not ignored those towns and cities, perhaps it would still be representing them.

This fund has happened when the Government are tackling an unprecedented public health crisis. Covid-19 is the biggest challenge this country has faced since world war two. Some might have forgiven the Government if they had paused the initiative while they focused on the pandemic, but rather than doing that, they have powered ahead, giving hope and optimism to places such as Peterborough and helping communities to build back better as we overcome the pandemic.

This funding also includes the future high streets fund, which aims to renew town centres and high streets to make them more attractive places to visit, increasing footfall, driving growth and supporting local businesses. That is exactly what Lincoln Road, Westgate and other parts of Peterborough need. The pandemic has kept people away from the high street. People are eating takeaways and restaurant meals at home, and they are shopping online. My mobile phone boasts not just Deliveroo but, as a result of the pandemic and lockdown, Just Eat and Uber Eats. As convenient as that is, and as good as the hospitality in Peterborough has been at adapting, there is a real fear that hospitality and retail will suffer as we come out of the pandemic because people's shopping and leisure habits have changed. That is why we need to think differently about town centres and high streets and make them a destination.

We need to create new, innovative high streets offering different things, such as pop-up shops, entertainment, interactive experiences, culture, leisure and mixed use including residential, as well as fun, safe and changing nightlife and hospitality. The towns fund is the catalyst for change, because private sector money and investment will follow, unlocking the potential of our towns and cities.

It is a message of hope, and it shows these communities that the Government and their local MPs have not forgotten them. Will the Minister remain committed to the plan? Will he confirm that there are chances for more towns and cities beyond the 101 already identified to submit bids for the future? Will he stress the importance of local MP engagement and ask all MPs from across the House to get on board with the towns fund and its potential to transform lives?

To conclude, I am all pumped up for Peterborough in 2021, '22, '23 and beyond. We have a new university coming, Fletton Quays and a new Government hub; the station quarter, a new cinema and Queensgate expansion is planned; and the Embankment will become an all-year-round destination—and now we have £23 million through the towns fund. We are making the decisions now that will guarantee our future health, wealth and happiness in the future. I am so excited that we are going to unleash our potential, but I am just as excited about this country's potential, and as we level up and build back better from this pandemic, this is what the towns fund can deliver.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): The three-minute time limit will now come into force. I would remind hon. Members who are participating virtually that a countdown clock will be visible on their screens. I do advise them to stick to that because we have a lot of people who want to contribute. Obviously, in the Chamber, there is the usual clock for Members to look at.

3.25 pm

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab) [V]: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I look forward to this technology of the clock counting me down.

This is an important debate. Britain's lop-sided economy has left many of our towns, in recent decades, feeling abandoned as we both centralise and deindustrialise our economy. Of course, we cannot halt economic progress, but we should never turn our backs on those held-back communities in the towns. We clearly need state intervention, but on a massive scale—a new Marshall plan. The towns fund simply does not hack it. Towns have been left behind by gigantic global capital flows driven by a new and even more remote phase of capitalism and by a political elite operating in the interests of capitalism, rather than of those communities.

I represent small towns and villages that at one time were at the very heart of the mighty Yorkshire coalfield. They helped create our wealth, heated our homes and powered our industries, but now too often they feel abandoned, especially as covid begins to impact more heavily on those same towns. We owe those communities a huge duty of solidarity. Large areas in my constituency—those great Yorkshire villages and towns such as Featherstone, Hemsworth, South Elmsall, Upton, South Kirkby, and the list goes on—are among the most deprived communities in the country, but not a penny has come to us from the towns fund.

Let us be honest, the financial allocation is inadequate, and much of it is anyway recycled from other spending programmes. Deprived communities are forced to compete against each other for a share of a fund that in any case is unfairly distributed. More than half the towns that get the money from the towns fund are not even in the most deprived category, and quite a lot of them just happen to be in areas of political interest to the governing party.

The distribution of financial resources and the location of economic growth are dictated largely by the whims of financial markets, leaving so many towns left behind, and then there is the apparently grubby gerrymandering of the fund itself, as I see it. It does not have to be like that. We do have the power to change things. Don't say

[Jon Trickett]

it can't be done: look at how the last Labour Government used their power to intervene in the collapsing banking market. First, however, we would need to replace that part of the British establishment that serves the interests of big money rather than seeking to be its master. With a radical Government on their side and adequate funding, Britain's towns can once again become the cradles of economic growth, cultural creativity and social justice.

3.28 pm

Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con) [V]: It gives me great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Paul Bristow), who was very positive, and the not so positive hon. Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett).

I am sure that, across this House, we as Members of Parliament and, in part, representatives of our communities have as our driving aim and ambition the wish to leave our constituencies in a better, more prosperous and equal way than when we were first elected. I am one of the few MPs sitting in this House who has lost their seat at a general election and, fortuitously, regained that same seat subsequently. When one loses one's seat, funnily enough one has plenty of time to reflect and think back to all one's achievements, and to those issues or projects that had been delayed. When I lost in 2017, I was able to reflect on my record, and I am proud that I was able to say that Lincoln was a better, more connected, prosperous and equal community than when I was first elected in 2010. Our two universities continue to prosper, with Lincoln recently being granted its own medical school after I engaged with other organisations to promote its existence, initially in 2011. We also had direct, fast and regular train links to London, the now-complete Lincoln eastern bypass was under construction and the average worker had a higher wage and a lower tax bill than they did under a Labour Government.

Lincoln has prospered, and continues to prosper, with a Conservative Member of Parliament fighting its corner and a receptive Conservative Government, but we now have a further, new opportunity to ensure that our constituencies level up, flourish and provide employment, incomes and livelihoods for our constituents. I believe that Lincoln's bid for the towns fund will do this and I hope that Government colleagues share my positivity for Lincoln's towns fund application. I would like to take this opportunity to officially thank my fellow scouser and colleague, my right hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), who, as a former Minister, procured this opportunity for the city that I am so proud, honoured and privileged to represent.

When people arrive and exit at Lincoln train station, with its ticket room plaque commemorating the official redevelopment and reopening, they are immediately greeted by the shell of a grand old hotel, the Barbican. It has unfortunately stood empty for well over a decade. If one of the projects in our bid is successful, it will be transformed into a production and maker hub for the creative industries. The space would enable the clustering and incubation of creative businesses and the establishment of a creative business network. This would be a distinctive, visible and high-quality offer in the heart of the city. I note

that, as a landlord, the Lincolnshire Co-op is an incredibly commercial landlord and has steadfastly refused in over a decade to invest any of its finances into the site.

We also have a proposal for the urban regeneration of Tentercroft Street. This project will support the redevelopment of a strategic brownfield site, to create new workspace and city living in the heart of the city centre. But by far my favourite of the proposals is the bid for Wigford Way. Once a critical artery for our city centre businesses and central road network, Wigford Way is now underused due to changes in pedestrianisation and flows of traffic, following the improvements secured through funding during my early years as the Member of Parliament for both the high street and Brayford wharf level-crossing footbridges and the east-west link road, so it now offers an opportunity for centre development, or rather, to be reimagined to improve and reconnect distinctive quarters of our city.

For all those who live, work, visit and study in our beautiful, historic and well-loved city, I will always put Lincoln first.

3.32 pm

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The towns fund: great in theory, but in practice, not a lot, and it leaves out London, bringing accusations of gerrymandering. Announced by the last PM on a hunt for votes for her doomed EU withdrawal Bill, when there was another deadline looming, it was seen as a Brexit bribe to bring prosperity after we leave the EU. By the end of the year, an election was called, and it was clear that 60 out of the 61 lucky winners were in Tory target seats. A lot of them translated into gains, such as Newcastle-under-Lyme and Bishop Auckland.

The Public Accounts Committee noted how criteria for inclusion and adjudicating success were "vague", while Professor Hanretty, giving evidence, went further, labelling it pork-barrelling based on party politics, not need. The remainder of it is a competitive bidding process, leaving towns, which are not a commonly understood unit of analysis, pitted against one other at a time when the country needs bringing together. Why not suburbs? Marginal Cheadle got, whereas nearby Didsbury did not. London suburbs, too, are blighted by all the guidance that was initially published—ageing population, reducing economic prosperity, high streets with reducing footfall. Ealing has a housing crisis, with 10,000 on the waiting list, and a social care crisis, yet our budget has been slashed by 64% since 2010—36p in every £1 it had—leaving huge holes, even with the covid extra. Every time there is another Government U-turn, there is more expenditure in this failed tiering experiment.

Yes, our capital generates enormous wealth, but we are never too far away from pockets of poverty. In this borough, Westminster, Church Street ward is, on some indexes, the most deprived in the country—it is certainly the most overcrowded. In East Acton and South Acton, the streets are definitely not paved with gold, yet London is completely ineligible. Food bank use has doubled in the last five years. It has 40% child poverty and pensioner poverty. The fastest-growing unemployment in the country is found in London.

Small beer and a drop in the ocean, compared with the revenue that we have lost from council coffers since 2010 and the EU structural funds that we will no longer

get, will not cut it. Also, pitting the rest of the country against London—this demonising of our capital—is a dangerous policy. The only transparent thing about the towns fund is its naked politicking. It said that it would take the decisions away from Whitehall, but instead it has delivered them to Conservative campaign headquarters; the decision making is taking place there now, not in Whitehall. Perhaps the Secretary of State, when he is not scrapping with his pals to get money for his own patch, should stop his imagined war on the woke, because there is work to be done.

3.35 pm

Kate Griffiths (Burton) (Con) [V]: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Paul Bristow) for securing this important debate. I speak to the House today as a proud member of the Burton town deal board. The Minister will have seen for himself the plans put forward by the board, which set out a clear vision for building on Burton-on-Trent's unique strengths. The vision behind our recently submitted town investment plan is sound, and representatives from the public, private and voluntary sectors across Burton have worked hard to identify a programme of investment that will secure the town's economic growth prospects.

The River Trent is a huge natural asset, and we must make better use of the opportunities it affords. Improving town centre living with key walking and cycling routes and improved riverside areas will offer a healthier environment to live in, as well as attracting visitors into the town. Individual projects have been identified, including bringing a regional learning hub to Burton that will provide opportunities for access to skills and training, offering residents a route to prosperity as well retaining and encouraging businesses to the area. By providing investment in Burton, this Government will ensure that our historic brewing town, full of heritage and natural attributes, has a resilient, better and brighter future ahead.

As I talk today about Burton, I that know my constituents in Uttoxeter will be asking, "What about us?" Burton has its chance to secure funding for its town investment plan, but let me tell the Minister about the potential that Uttoxeter offers. We must seize the regeneration opportunities that Uttoxeter holds. We must seize the chance to deliver a bold and creative vision that offers not just more housing—which I know from recent correspondence is not what residents want—but the chance to create a new future and purpose for this historic market town. Let us take the opportunity to regenerate the brownfield sites and high streets with community spaces, leisure and social facilities and access to expanded healthcare facilities. Uttoxeter has a wonderful GP—he is one of many—and Dr David Atherton's contribution to our vaccine roll-out alone should afford him the chance of a bigger, brighter, more accessible practice.

I should like to make just one more request on behalf of both Burton and Uttoxeter, and that is to deliver the project B upgrade to the A50 that has been promised. This junction upgrade at heart of the midlands manufacturing corridor would not only hugely benefit residents and visitors to Burton and Uttoxeter but unlock enterprise opportunities right across the region, stimulate growth and development and provide a vital contribution to a well-functioning and highly productive economy.

3.38 pm

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab) [V]: Like many towns, St Helens has been through good times and bad. We were at the heart of the industrial revolution when we were home to the first industrial canal, and we remain the home of glass. The security glass in the Chamber was produced in St Helens. We are also the home town of the best rugby league team in the country, which I make no apology for mentioning once again. We are a proud town with a welcoming community, yet there is no denying that the past decade has been tough for the town. The impact of austerity is still felt, and the last year has made things worse. The last year has thrown a brick through an already shattered window.

There are problems with the fund, particularly with transparency and with how fairly it is being distributed, but at its heart it is a good thing and the right thing to do. The UK has the most regionally unbalanced economy in Europe, and it is not sustainable to continue like this. Even Germany, which spent the majority of my lifetime as two separate countries, the eastern part of which suffered from poverty and severe economic difficulties, has less inequality than Britain today.

People in towns in the north have felt abandoned and forgotten for too long, and rightly so. The next few years present both challenges and opportunities. The economic woes that our town and many others have experienced will hasten changes that were already happening. The world and the economy are changing, and we must adapt with it. The recovery from this crisis will be green, and it will be global. It must and will bring good-paying, high-skilled jobs to the areas that need them.

I have had the honour of sitting on St Helens town deal board. Last week, we finalised and submitted our proposal. Being green and being global is at the heart of it. The centrepiece of our bid is Glass Futures, a research and development facility. Glass Futures will work with the global glass industry and supply chain. It will bridge the gap between research and development and implementation. As our economy recovers in a green and global way, glass will be the low-carbon global material of choice. Glass is more than just windows. In fact, I am seen today through a piece of glass that almost every screen contains. The whole country has spent the past year looking at friends and family through sheets of glass in their phones or computer screens.

The global centre of excellence in the proposal will put St Helens at the heart of the global glass industry, and we ask the Government to support this as part of the global Britain strategy. A few months ago, I was pleased to welcome the Secretary of State to attend our town board to hear about our proposals. As an MP, I cover two boroughs, St Helens and Knowsley, both of which deserve and need investment. I urge the Minister to fight on our behalf and on behalf of all the towns in the country, to get the funding needed, so that all towns can get their fair share of investment.

3.41 pm

Ian Levy (Blyth Valley) (Con) [V]: As the first Conservative MP for Blyth Valley, I have been given the opportunity to help breathe life into my hometown, which has been neglected for many decades. Having lived in Blyth all my life, I have seen at first hand the decay and abandonment that the town centre has

[Ian Levy]

experienced, despite its great potential. I was delighted when the town centre was awarded £11.12 million of funding from the future high streets fund, to allow for much-needed investment and improvement.

The towns fund provides limitless opportunities for regions across the country to unleash their full potential, while delivering on the Government's agenda to level up. Such investment has the capacity to dramatically improve, regenerate and unite towns and communities across this wonderful country of ours. In Blyth, the funding will support the revitalisation of Blyth marketplace and Bridge Street by providing new leisure and cultural facilities at the heart of the town centre. As part of the recovery from the pandemic, the announcement on 25 September that shovel-ready projects in the constituency will be given a £750,000 boost was particularly welcome. I am extremely pleased that major work will start soon on improving Bowes Street, which will immediately make a real difference to the town.

In addition, the £1.5 million of funding confirmed for the reopening of the Northumberland rail line will transform the town centre into a flourishing, prosperous and vibrant one. This allocation of funding is a great testament to those at the heart of the community who show great resolve and overcome the challenges we face, working together, and I am confident that Blyth will have a bright and prosperous future for generations to come.

3.43 pm

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Blyth Valley (Ian Levy) in this important debate. The Government have talked a good game about levelling up, but it is no more than a slogan for areas like Barnsley. The Labour party supports funding for our towns, but it is crucial that it is done transparently and fairly. Sixty out of the 61 areas that were allocated money by Ministers from the towns fund were in Conservative-held or Conservative target seats. By anyone's standards, that is not a fair approach. Labour councils have shouldered the pain of cuts to local government over the last decade. Barnsley Council has had the biggest cuts in the country, and that has had a huge knock-on effect on local services, from adult social care to road maintenance and bus services.

A recent report by the Coalfields Regeneration Trust on the impact of coronavirus on older industrial Britain concluded that towns and communities like Barnsley were

"lagging behind before the crisis"

and will therefore find it harder to recover. That is why the Government need to invest in training and skills, rethink cuts to universal credit, which has provided a lifeline for many in my community, and make sure that young people are given access to education, whatever their postcode is.

The pandemic is not a great leveller. As I said in my first speech in this place,

"not all communities are equal"—[*Official Report*, 12 July 2017; Vol. 627, c. 347.]

and this crisis has further highlighted inequalities. The UK has had the worst recession of any major economy. The Government must now take a different approach: secure our jobs, support our high streets and strengthen

our communities through investments that deliver for people in every area, not just those represented by Members on the Government Benches.

3.45 pm

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con) [V]: I welcome this debate and thank my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Paul Bristow) and the Government for supporting the town fund and Harlow. Harlow has been my home for 20 years. It is a town of achievement, aspiration, community and opportunity. Although Harlow may not yet have enormous reserves of economic capital, it has enough social and cultural capital to fill any vault in any bank.

I wish to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the Government for the recent investments in our town. Harlow has received £50 million for the M11 junction 7A, hundreds of millions for our new Harlow hospital, and major investment for our enterprise zone. I am proud to note that Harlow College is one of the finest colleges in the country, and Harlow is on its way to becoming the skills capital of the east of England, following a recent £3 million upgrade for T-level delivery and the construction of the £12 million advanced manufacturing centre. I welcome the fact that the Government have already committed £300 million to the creation of Public Health England's science campus in Harlow, in anticipation of PHE's expected move. I look forward to the Government confirming the funding for the project in the next spending statement.

Despite all that, Harlow remains the second most-deprived area in Essex. It is essential that that is recognised in the Government's levelling-up agenda. Part of the town centre is in a real state of disrepair, plagued by antisocial behaviour. Our neighbourhood centres are in desperate need of regeneration. Harlow's towns fund bid sets out to remedy such problems and address the challenges posed by ageing infrastructure, through town centre improvements; the redevelopment of Staple Tye neighbourhood centre; measures to increase connectivity at the enterprise zone; and investment in a new institute of technology.

Sadly, we lost out on £10.4 million from the future high streets fund because the Government procurement letter stated that Harlow Council's bid

"did not meet stringent criteria on value for money for the taxpayer".

The towns fund bid is a chance to make up for that loss. It will be the thread that ties together all the Government's recent investments in Harlow. The town centre must be fit for purpose to support economic growth and social capital and make Harlow a place that offers community, security and prosperity for all our citizens—a town that aspirational people want to move to and live in.

I give special thanks to the Minister, who is responsible for the towns fund, all members of the Harlow growth board, the chief executive of Harlow Council and the senior officers who are working day and night to make sure the bid succeeds. I hope that, this time, our bid will be a success and our town will get the much needed funding that it deserves.

3.48 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab) [V]: Castleford has put in a bid to the towns fund, and I have been working with Wakefield Council,

community organisations and local businesses to draw up plans for badly needed investment here in our town; to restore some of the cuts in investment and jobs we have had over the past 10 years; to regenerate our town centre and reconnect with our riverside; and to build on our community strengths and community pride.

We want not only to restore our riverside—the River Aire runs straight past the mill here and we want people to be able to enjoy it again—but to boost Henry Moore Square in the town centre; support local jobs; restore Kingdom Hall, one of the oldest buildings in the town centre; and invest in Queen’s Mill, where the old Allinson’s flour mill has been taken over by the Castleford Heritage Trust, a local community organisation that has made it the community hub, not only supporting residents during the covid crisis but growing small businesses as well as new jobs and opportunities.

We want to boost local skills, working with the Castleford Tigers Foundation to set up a new adult skills centre, because in our town the number of adults in training and education has halved over recent years as adult skills budgets have been cut. That is shocking when we need those skills to boost the jobs of the future. Too often, our industrial jobs and proud heritage have been hit and we have not had the investment for the new jobs of the future.

I urge Ministers to support not only Castleford’s bid but all our towns, because the problem with the Government’s approach is that the towns fund simply does not go far enough. I have been calling for investment in our towns for many years, as part of the Labour towns campaign, because over the past 10 years the rate of jobs growth in our towns has been half the rate in our cities, the rate of business growth in our towns has been half the rate in our cities, and austerity has hit our towns much harder than our cities. We have lost more public services and seen more services shrink back under 10 years of Conservative Government austerity.

In Yorkshire and the Humber, 16 towns were chosen for the towns fund. The first eight were those that ranked most strongly against independent criteria on skills need, investment need and deprivation. Rightly, Castleford was chosen in that top eight, but Knottingley was ninth on the list and was left out. Instead, the Government chose to invest in towns that did not have the same level of skills need or deprivation and that had not seen the same scale of cuts—Knottingley has been one of the hardest hit by austerity over the past 10 years, losing its library, sports centre and investment in our town. We need a chance for Knottingley to get its share of investment, and for Normanton and Pontefract to get their share too. We need a comprehensive approach, not just a towns fund.

3.51 pm

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con) [V]: We will take no lectures from the Labour party, which had 13 years in power and did absolutely nothing to invest in any meaningful way in our towns across the north of England.

I very much welcome the bids submitted by the two towns that cover my constituency, Scunthorpe and Goole. I will leave it to my near neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Holly Mumby-Croft), to talk about that town’s bid, but I would like to speak about the Goole bid. I thank Joseph Richardson, who has

chaired our board here in Goole, and all the board members. I give a particular shout-out to Peter Campey from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government—we are not supposed to name officials—for his wise counsel throughout.

As the Minister will see, our bid covers digital, town centre regeneration, leisure improvements, connectivity and, of course, a flood protection project. With regard to revenue, I ask him to be generous when he looks at our bid, particularly with reference to our proposal for the Goole to Leeds line, which of course would benefit a number of constituencies.

For those who do not know Goole, we are a town and port in the north of England. It was created as a company town about 200 years ago, and my ancestors were some of the first people to move to it. We face many of the issues that sadly are common to many northern towns that have missed out on regeneration in recent decades. When I was elected 10 years ago, we had very high youth unemployment, and unemployment that was well above the national average. Although we are now below that, there are still considerable issues with skilling people up to take many of the jobs being created locally.

However, we have had a lot of good news in recent years, not least of which is the massive investment by Siemens, which is busy constructing a rail factory here that will produce the trains for the London underground. There is also huge investment from Croda, and that has happened with Government support. However, those who come to Goole will still see a hollowed-out town centre, as can be seen in many such towns. While we have improvements in educational standards, big investment coming in and hundreds of new homes being built, the town centre looks like it is still in decline, as is common across the country.

That is why the towns fund is so important. That is why it is so vital that as many of these bids that have been submitted are granted by the Government. I can see the Minister almost nodding. I am sure that he will look kindly on Goole’s bid, because although we have good stuff going on here, we still have considerable challenges in the town centre and with our college, the closure of which has just been announced. I hope that he will continue the investment that Goole has received in recent years and generously approve the bid that has been submitted.

3.54 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab) [V]: The towns fund might be a good idea, but the lack of transparency in decision making has led to understandable concerns about the impartiality of the process, and from what I have seen of it in the Tees valley, those concerns are well founded.

In December, I wrote to the Secretary of State about Billingham, soon to be the home of Novavax vaccine manufacture. The town is home to 35,000 proud Teessiders as well as the Billingham Forum, which is a huge sports and theatre venue including pools, gyms and an ice rink. The town is a cultural hub, but it desperately needs help to further develop. As the singer of Maximo Park, Billingham-born Paul Smith, sings, it is

“where industrial tunnels were our fairytale castles”.

In short, it is a town bursting with potential.

[Alex Cunningham]

Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council approached the Government to request that Billingham be included in the cohort of towns eligible to bid for funds, but it was refused. Back in October, Billingham councillors wrote to the Secretary of State asking why other Tees towns such as Thornaby in Stockton South, with a Tory MP, were fortunate enough to have been included in the selection of the first 100 towns for the fund when Billingham was not, even though it clearly fits the criteria every bit as well, if not more so, than Thornaby—although rest assured that we celebrate with the people of Thornaby that they do have the investment that they need. The decision led to confusion and concern locally that could have easily been put to bed if Ministers had responded to the request from the Billingham councillors to explain why their town had been passed over. Instead, the Minister fobbed off the councillors' request for information and did not even engage with their concerns.

I followed up with my own letter, which was responded to, but with only slightly more information. It said that Billingham will get the chance to apply to the £300 million levelling-up fund, which has been designated for a towns fund competition. I personally find this quite astonishing. If the Government had sufficient information to select the first 100 towns that were eligible for a deal, why do we have to have more wasteful bidding processes that pit deprived communities against each other for scraps from the Government's table? Why can the Government not use existing data and provide investment now—and cut out the middleman, saving our councils time and money in doing so?

It does not matter what money is being dished out these days by the Government: whether it is to the NHS, to councils or for town centres—Ministers are quite happy, and not even embarrassed, to pass over some areas and favour their own. It is time for fairness in the system; time for real, true levelling up and proper resources; and time for towns like Billingham to get the support that they need.

3.57 pm

Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con) [V]: We promised to level up towns like Scunthorpe, and the £3.6 billion towns fund provides just the opportunity to make some of the meaningful, real-life differences that we have talked about before in this Chamber. We have a Conservative council in North Lincs. I served on it for five years. I know that it is used to getting the absolute most from every single pound that it has available to it. We are not backward in coming forward in Scunthorpe, and we have already secured future high streets funding of over £10 million, but there is more to be done.

I have lived in the Scunthorpe area all my life. I love my home town and I want our young people, many of whom I have met over the past year, to have opportunities and jobs that mean they want to stay close to home too. Scunthorpe is a great place to live, to build a family and to grow a business, and we can make it even better. In addition to this, our area has applied for free port status. Connectivity is another of our strengths, and it will amplify the returns of a towns fund investment. Situated south of the Humber, we are a strategic mid-point between Immingham dock, Humber side airport, Hull, Lincoln, Grimsby and Doncaster.

As a region, we are really ambitious. The Minister will see that our towns fund proposals bring to life the Government's levelling-up goals. Under the diligent chairmanship of Mary Stewart, the board has listened to residents' views, and in true northern style we have eked out the best possible value we feel we can get for our area. These proposals will deliver real bang for our buck. I hope that the Minister will share my enthusiasm both for the projects and for my home town.

Of course we must and we will continue to celebrate our world-class steelmaking and our proud industrial heritage. However, we also recognise the importance of resilience and industry diversification. This includes the delivery of an advanced manufacturing park, the creation of a new cultural arts and heritage offer in our urban centre, and sustainable, lifelong integration of skills.

Through the formidable business team led by Lesley Potts, we have seen our local council demonstrate their ability to deliver these projects, time and time again. We are a really safe pair of hands for the towns fund. We are genuinely ambitious for our area, and look forward to working with the Government on the towns fund to deliver for local people.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Before I call Charlotte Nichols, I will inform everybody how the rest of the afternoon is going to go. At 4.38, I will call Patricia Gibson to wind up for six minutes, then Steve Reed at 4.44 for eight minutes, and then Luke Hall at 4.52 for eight minutes. We are grateful to Paul for forgoing his last two minutes at the end of the debate.

4 pm

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): Every one of us in this House wants to see investment in our constituents and our communities, particularly after a decade of Tory-imposed austerity, so I welcome the £22 million that has been allocated to Warrington from the fund. As part of the town deal board, I pay special thanks to all the stakeholders and officers of Warrington Borough Council for drawing together this successful bid. But—you knew that there would be a “but”, Mr Deputy Speaker—this is not a sustainable alternative to proper, long-term funding of our towns and their needs, and cannot and should not be sold as such by the Government.

As has already been mentioned, the past 10 years have seen core funding for local authorities cut by £15 billion, and our councils are struggling even more with the understandable impact of covid on their income streams and spending expectations, which the LGA estimates will be a further £2.6 billion. In comparison, the towns fund programme replaces only a fifth of the shortfall. We cannot expect our towns to thrive, as I would like to see, if our funding is stripped to the bone and sometimes the marrow, and we are left hoping for a special handout from Westminster once a decade. How does that assist long-term planning, or the development of sustainable local economies? We need a more holistic approach.

In Warrington, I want the certainty of a long-overdue new hospital Bill. I want assurances that there will be funding for the restoration and redevelopment of local leisure and library facilities, including Culcheth Community Campus and Padgate library. Above all, I want a guarantee that Warrington Borough Council will be reimbursed

for the moneys it has had to spend because of the pandemic, or else all the work that has gone into this bid will be fatally undermined. I want towns such as mine to be self-sustaining and able to offer opportunities for young people and well-paid jobs so that they become hubs of prosperity, rather than being emptied out. We in Warrington benefit greatly from the high-skilled and highly rewarded employment opportunities provided by the nuclear industry. I want the Government to do more to deliver the next generation of new nuclear, which will provide more such quality prospects in Warrington and elsewhere, and to commit to an industrial strategy that makes levelling up the north-west about deeds, not words.

In his response to today's debate, I hope the Minister will set out how he will judge the success of the towns fund, and how he will ensure that continuous financial support for towns is restored, rather than acting as though we should be grateful for a chance to bid for funding in a once-in-a-decade competition.

4.3 pm

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): Over £129 million of Government funding has been pumped into Blackpool since my election, including £39.5 million from the towns fund—the highest single amount awarded to any town in England. I place on record my sincere thanks to the Government for the extraordinary level of funding that Blackpool has received, something never before witnessed on this scale. I know it will make a real and sustained difference to the businesses and residents I represent.

It is fantastic to see that despite grappling with covid-19 and the challenges it brings, the Government are committed to levelling up and ensuring that constituencies such as mine will not be left behind. The £39.5 million town deal is being used to fund regeneration projects across my constituency, as well to lever in private investment for new development. Most notably, the money allocated to the central development project will bring £300 million-worth of private investment into Blackpool and deliver more than 1,000 new jobs. Our famous illuminations, which are enjoyed by almost 4 million visitors every year, will also receive an upgrade thanks to the towns fund.

Unfortunately, although we received millions in our town deal and from the getting building fund, Blackpool did not receive the expected grants from the future high streets fund. Receiving a town deal is, of course, independent of any decision on the future high streets fund, and the decision not to approve any of these schemes was because of deficiencies in the bid from Blackpool Council. It is disappointing to say the least that my local authority was unable to satisfy the bid criteria laid down by the Department, and local residents will rightly feel disheartened that Blackpool has missed out as a consequence.

In that regard, I welcome the fact that the new levelling-up fund requires direct input from Members of Parliament. In my constituency, there is widespread support for reopening Blackpool airport, for commercial passengers flights and for a new rail loop to increase train services. Those proposals have received lukewarm support at best from Blackpool Council but would provide a huge boost to the local economy, by creating jobs, increasing tourism and securing investment. The levelling-up fund provides a vital opportunity for Members to submit proposals that attract local support in instances such as these, where there is potentially a lack of local

authority co-operation. So many people are predicting that once the pandemic is over there will be a rise in domestic tourism, and thanks to Government funding supercharging regeneration in Blackpool, we will be able to take advantage.

4.6 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD) [V]: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for giving me an opportunity to speak in this debate. It has been fantastic to hear the stories of how the towns fund has helped individual town centres, and I am pleased for those communities that have seen a boost from the fund. Members will know that the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee, of which I am a member, have expressed doubts about the transparency of the decision making relating to the fund's distribution. I do not want to reiterate these concerns, as they have been expanded on by various Members in this debate, but I note that the approach of selecting certain town centres for funding while excluding others is bound to lead to inequalities. Town centres that could have benefited from funding will miss out. The hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) made an excellent point about London suburbs, and obviously I, too represent one. There are lots of opportunities in London's suburbs for levelling up, not least now that we are seeing less commuting, and lots of town centres will be looking for funds to revive, to help those who are working from home more often.

In the interim, our town centres have had to weather the unprecedented economic blow of the pandemic lockdown and a further decimation of the retail industry. Once the restrictions are lifted, there will be an urgent need to make a substantial economic offer to town centre businesses, not just to help revive them, but to provide jobs, and to deliver local goods and services, and, most importantly, public spaces, where local people can come together and meet each other. It is those informal meetings that we are all missing out on during lockdown. All our town centres will need assistance to bounce back from this crisis, so I call on the Government to take measures that will support all our communities, and abandon this winners and losers approach that we have seen with the allocation of funds from this towns fund.

The need to review our approach to business rates has been aired many times in this Chamber, and I hope we will hear more on it in due course, in order to level the playing field between physical and digital businesses. Similarly, I would like to see a change in the way in which commercial leases are granted and an abolition of upward-only rent reviews. I have heard that ask from many, many businesses in the past year. We should also reform local authority funding to give all councils more money to spend on investing in their own town centres. There are great opportunities for our retail and hospitality sectors, and our cultural organisations, once the lockdown restrictions are lifted, and they will bring new employment to every part of the UK. I urge the Government to put the investment necessary into those sectors to help them all recover from the current downturn.

4.9 pm

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con) [V]: I am absolutely delighted to be able to say a few words about the Bridgwater town fund. Good ideas

[Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger]

are always the simplest and this idea is absolutely terrific. It is working and it is working well. The chance to bring in brand new schemes to the benefit of the whole Bridgwater area has been put together by some of the best people in our community. It is like winning the lottery and then doing something very constructive with it. It showcases the imagination of the folk who know what they are doing and love the town. I am proud to play a small part in the town board. I was asked to join: the rules of the board insist that local MPs, parish councils, town councils and all sorts of tiers of government take part in the process. I pay enormous tribute to Sedgemoor District Council and Bridgwater Town Council, which have been marvellous.

Obviously, the people who understand this place and work in the town are invaluable. They are given seats at the table from the word go—community groups, businesses small and large, and the enterprise partnership. The Government rightly wanted to use local brainwaves to start things moving. The expertise of Bridgwater Town Council and Sedgemoor District Council is vital. They know how to make things work. We just have to look at Hinkley. If I have a niggle, it is the presence of Somerset County Council on the board. I pay tribute to Fiona McMillan who has to put up with an enormous amount as the chairman.

We could try to measure Somerset's contribution to the Bridgwater Town Council with a very powerful microscope—it is invisible. Somerset County Council has no role to play. It is insignificant, incompetent, and quickly round the corner with public money. Many people think that Somerset has been spending Government covid grants on other things, never mind this. Its book-keeping might well have been invented by Dickens's dodgy character Fagin—as in “You've got to pick a pocket or two.” I do not trust it, and I am not alone.

Let me give an up-to-the minute example. We learned today, thanks to the local news, that the county council wants to spend £3 million on a solar plant in Bridgwater. That is an enormous amount of money for a council with a debt worth hundreds of millions of pounds. It is no wonder that people wonder where it got the cash. Any sensible county council would have told Bridgwater Town Council and Sedgemoor District Council all about this in advance, but not this county council. It has nothing constructive to add to the towns fund and it cannot even be bothered to consult. That really says it all. We must look at changing that part of the rules and the Minister needs to look at this carefully.

I will say that, in Bridgwater, we have provided not only Hinkley, but one of the largest distribution centres, Morrisons, Wisemans, Mulberry Handbags, and Junction 24, the huge auction centre. We are doing our job and that towns fund has added to that. It has given us the jam, the cream on the cake. I tell you this, Mr Deputy Speaker, we are going from strength to strength and King Alfred would be proud.

4.12 pm

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): As someone who has served as a councillor for nearly 15 years, I have a strong interest in local government funding. Let me start by saying that no Labour MP will oppose greater funding for local authorities because we recognise

and value the vital work that they do. I thank all those at Durham County Council who have worked tirelessly during this pandemic to keep key services running.

However, to call the towns fund scheme flawed would be an understatement. From the inadequately low level of funding, to the complete lack of transparency and fairness in its allocation, the scheme looks like yet another scandal overseen by the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government.

The towns fund is essentially a sticking plaster over the gaping wound that is the catastrophic cuts to local authority funding under successive Conservative Governments. The £3.6 billion fund is simply a drop in the ocean compared with the estimated £15 billion of cuts to local authorities over the past decade. Conservative Governments have repeatedly slashed funding for key services, while somehow expecting people to be grateful for modest increases. On top of this, the Government used a scattergun approach to selecting recipients, with some towns receiving funding, but with hundreds more left without. Surely the purpose of the levelling-up agenda is to reduce inequality and to increase life chances across regions, not to extend an existing postcode lottery when it comes to local authority resources. I fear that this is just the latest example of levelling-up for the Conservatives as a catchy, yet meaningless slogan that they do not truly understand.

Like many people, I was disgusted to see that Newark, in the Secretary of State's constituency, has been selected for £25 million of funding, apparently to renovate a section of a castle. I mean no disrespect to the people of Newark, but it is a fact that it is only 270th on the list of the most deprived towns in the country—just think about what the more in need towns could have done with that money. Can any MP on the Government Benches say, hand on heart, that they are comfortable with that decision?

Funding for local authorities should be allocated fairly and transparently, with the money going to where it is needed most. Sadly, the Secretary of State has deliberately mishandled the towns fund to the extent that it fails these tests. While we could have been discussing a successful scheme, we are instead left debating yet another scandal.

4.15 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I welcome the Government's interest and their recognition of the importance of Royal Leamington Spa to be a recipient of potentially £10 million. As an important sub-regional shopping centre, it is a vital part of the region's economy and quality of life, so let me praise the council officers at Warwick District Council for the quality of their original submission and the work they have done since in refining the proposals against a reduced contribution proposed by the Government. That said, £10 million is a sound amount for them to work with, and I hope it can do much to address the air quality in the town, highlighted by the World Health Organisation as an issue, while revitalising the commercial centre more widely.

However, let me cut to the chase. Over the past decade the Government have cut £15 billion from local authorities across the UK, yet handed back just £3.6 billion to some towns which they invited to bid for moneys. Members will know that back in October I questioned

the Prime Minister—did I have the guts, he asked me—about how it could be that the Secretary of State could approve tens of millions of pounds for his Minister and his constituency town of Darwen, while that Minister could return the favour and approve tens of millions of pounds for the Secretary of State's constituency town of Newark—beyond belief. But how were the 101 towns selected in the first instance? Surely, if the Government were honest in their claim to level up, they would have allocated the moneys to the most deprived communities across England, but they have not. In the past year, we have heard many cases of the Government using algorithms, or more often malgorithms, but this is back-of-a-fag-packetithm. While Housing, Communities and Local Government officials may have recommended that the Government did one thing—namely, allocate funds to the most deserving communities—instead the Secretary of State and Ministers allocated moneys to towns in the lowest priority category.

It is also worth noting that the Government chose to allocate by region, not need, so the north and the midlands were disadvantaged by their political ploys. How else could Bournemouth benefit but, shockingly, South Shields be left off? Both are seaside towns, but I think I know which is in greater need of the funding. It is something Harry Redknapp would have appreciated more than most. I will not even go into Cheadle. While Big Ben no longer bongs, this Government bung, and they are doing it on an industrial scale. A simple analysis of the towns that have received moneys underlines the political tactics laid bare. Certainly the timing of the announcement, in the last few weeks before the last general election, might give us a clue. It was carefully targeted at marginal seats. Interestingly, the impartial cross-party Public Accounts Committee concluded in its investigation that the selection process was not impartial. It took evidence from Christopher Hanretty, a professor of politics at Royal Holloway, who said that “the process by which towns were invited to bid for money from the Towns Fund was driven by party-political electoral advantage”, riding roughshod over any pretence to be levelling up this country. Any section 151 officer in a council would be sacked if they acted like this.

Any impartial observer will see this for what it is, and certainly the public do. It is grubby government of the worst order.

4.18 pm

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con) [V]: I should declare an interest as a member of the Middlesbrough town deal board, of which I am very proud to be a part.

The towns fund is a great Conservative policy, targeting investment at proud communities that have not shared equally in our country's success. It is a core part of levelling up—improving facilities, enhancing economic opportunity, unlocking private sector investment and boosting pride in place. We all want to have towns to be proud of. In the Tees Valley, that is no different for Middlesbrough, Thornaby, Hartlepool, Darlington or Redcar, all of which were invited to bid into the programme.

In my area, so much is going on locally to be positive about, from our free port bid—to be submitted shortly—to Teesside airport being saved and the regeneration of the Teesworks sites at Redcar by our Mayor, Ben Houchen. Indeed, only last week we had the wonderful news about the new Teesside vaccine against coronavirus.

The only thing locally that is not positive is the Labour party. Earlier in the debate, we heard the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) complaining about Stockton being disadvantaged, but Stockton received £16.5 million from the future high streets fund and Thornaby, as we heard, has its own town deal bid under way. So it is just nonsense to try to pretend that his borough is being disadvantaged.

Frankly, I want to be more positive. I pay tribute to all the council officers and business leaders giving their time and expertise to their local bids. In particular, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Jacob Young), who has been at the heart of the bid by his town; he cannot speak in this debate because of his role as a Parliamentary Private Secretary.

There is a lot for us to be excited about. We have £3.6 billion being invested—in a process approved by the independent civil service—to provide a major boost for left-behind communities like my home town. Helping the left behind used to be what the Labour party was all about; as it is, it is the Conservatives who are getting on with that job, and I am very proud of that. I am very grateful for the £20 million of future high streets funding announced in December for Middlesbrough and Loftus. I urge Ministers to show all possible speed in determining the outcome of Middlesbrough's town deal bid, so that we can make our town a better place to live and work.

Looking ahead, I would be grateful if the Minister in his remarks will advise on where we stand on potential future competitive rounds of bidding for the towns fund and the future high streets fund, because that will make a massive difference to a number of communities. I think of places in my constituency such as Guisborough or Brotton, both of which have exciting proposals, which could be unlocked with the support of that fund. That is the kind of initiative we need to see more of. It is time we had less negativity from the Opposition Benches about us putting levelling up into practice, so that we can all move forward as one country, overcome the challenges of covid and build a better Britain for all of us.

4.21 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab) [V]: I welcome the opportunity to debate the towns fund, because transparency and accountability are vital at all times, in particular when we are talking about a process that has largely been discredited due to the way in which the fund has been handed out so far. The priority to support town centres is undoubtedly the right one, but the process of deciding where that money is spent so far has undoubtedly been the wrong one.

I have consistently talked about the importance of the high street. So many people want to have pride in their local town and to see it thriving, and the towns fund is one clear way of realising that ambition. However, is that not something that every town should have the chance to benefit from? Should not that fund be distributed fairly, giving everyone a slice of the pie? Should not we be empowering local communities to choose their own priorities, rather than making them jump through multiple hoops in a competitive bidding process that is neither fair nor transparent?

What about other funds? When will we see the new version of the shared prosperity fund? We have left the EU, so we should have had that oven-ready to go a long time ago. Communities cannot wait while another complex set of opaque bidding procedures are cooked up.

[Justin Madders]

My town centre, Ellesmere Port, is struggling. It has been struggling for a long time now. As in many other towns, the rise of the internet and changes in shopping habits, accelerated by the pandemic, have led to shops closing down, sadly on an almost weekly basis. So we would welcome cash from the towns fund, but for it to be a truly transformative project, it needs to address not just the symptoms of decline, but the causes.

Where are the plans to tackle the massive disparities between the north and south, in employment opportunities, earnings and life expectancy? Why do so many young people feel they have to leave where they live and move to a city just to get a foot on the ladder? It is a scandal that where people are born and who they are born to are still the biggest determinants of their life chances. That is what this fund should be looking at, not at tarding up 12th-century gatehouses. Where has the money been spent so far? My research indicates that more than 80% of the towns fund cash to date has gone on management consultants—that is hardly the transformation we were hoping to see.

Power flows towards London and wealth flows upwards into the hands of the elite. A Westminster handout on Westminster terms, with Westminster priorities in mind, will not change that. For too long, people have felt left behind and held back by a system that does not work for them. People already feel that they do not have the power to take decisions about the most important things in their lives: whether a local hospital should stay open, where a new school might go, or even how often the buses run. To empower local communities, we need a different approach—no more crumbs from the table. We do not want divisive, politically motivated, short-term fixes that only have the electoral cycle in mind. We need a new, long-term approach that actually attempts to tackle the underlying issues, and one that empowers and enables our local communities by giving them the responsibility, the power and the resources to shape their own futures, allowing them finally to take back control.

4.24 pm

Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con) [V]: I have long believed in local government, and I hope that we can come to understand devolution as not merely meaning local administration—being given permission by the centre—and instead move towards local politicians being accountable to the electorate for the decisions they take locally, rather than to Whitehall to the current extent.

People often reference Lord Heseltine when it comes to localism, but I was always concerned that that vision had too much in it of local leaders coming down to London and essentially pleading with Ministers for funding. Ministers and civil servants cannot know the situation as well as those elected to represent their town. The devolution all-party parliamentary group, which I chair, has carried out a detailed inquiry into the importance of devolution, to be published fairly soon. Regeneration policy is a key part of it, and the report suggests a way forward for devolution and highlights some areas of blockage in the process that central Government may have inadvertently caused over many Administrations. However, those are thoughts for the future, and they do not mean for a split second within our current way of working that towns fund announcements by the Government are not welcome. It is the absolute opposite.

Having been the founder of an LEP, a county councillor, and even an MEP focused on regional development, I commend the vision and determination of those supporting regeneration in Northampton, both nationally and locally. We stand on the shoulders of some forceful advocates, like my friend and predecessor the late Brian Binley, but even so Northampton has suffered from a lack of investment in recent years. That is why the announcement of Northampton Forward's successful bid for over £8 million from the future high streets fund and the proposed towns fund bid, which is currently under review, are so vital.

Being on the board throughout the process, I know how hard the team has endeavoured to create innovative proposals, and I am particularly looking forward to seeing the regeneration of the former M&S building into a multi-use facility and the creation of a cultural hub and arts facilities to be used by NN Contemporary Art on Guildhall Road. I cannot sum up Northampton's case for regeneration funding better than Martin Mason, managing director of Tricker's, who recently said:

"As the largest town in England, and the home of Tricker's shoes, Northampton comes not only with its wealth of footwear history, but falls within the Oxford-Cambridge arc—an area linking the two cities together—a key focus of investment and regeneration by the UK government. The recently published Town Investment plan shows exactly why Northampton has the potential to be a vibrant and welcoming town centre for business, residents and visitors alike."

4.27 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Peterborough (Paul Bristow) on setting the scene so well. Owing to the benefits, it would be churlish of anyone to say that the scheme was not welcome. The towns fund was announced by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government in July 2019, with total funding of £3.6 billion composed of three separate strands. I welcomed that at the time, but back in November I asked about the potential success of Northern Ireland in similar scenarios:

"It is my understanding that local enterprise partnerships and investment promotion agencies across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were invited to submit nominations for the second round of the high potential opportunities scheme by 17 April 2020. I would be anxious to know the success of Northern Ireland applications for the towns fund."—[*Official Report*, 18 November 2020; Vol. 684, c. 357-358.]

From the report, I see plenty of wonderful projects, and I welcome them, but I note that there is no information about the position of other countries within the UK, which I would have liked to see given the statement by the then Chancellor Philip Hammond when the future high streets fund was first announced at the 2018 Budget:

"So if Britain's high streets are to remain at the centre of our community life, they will need to adapt."—[*Official Report*, 29 October 2018; Vol. 648, c. 663.]

It is clear that that was not an England-only aim when the scheme was designed, so it should follow that Scotland and Wales, which form the rest of Britain, and Northern Ireland, which makes the last section of the wonderful UK, should have similar projects. "Stronger together", as I always say, needs to be included at every stage. I am anxious that this House takes a holistic approach and ensures that projects in Northern Ireland see similar additional funding, whether directly or under the Barnett formula. I ask the Minister to address that in his summing up.

We are living in difficult days, none more so than for our high streets and the capital projects that the towns fund was designed to address. That includes projects to improve transport access to town centres and vehicle and pedestrian flow in town centres; congestion-relieving infrastructure; infrastructure to facilitate new housing and office space, and projects that seek to substitute underused and persistently vacant retail units with residential units. We have to look at that in the future. There are certainly worthy projects in my area, and I call on the Minister to work with all his counterparts in all devolved areas to ensure that similar goals are achieved UK-wide.

I welcome the scheme and its aim, and I look forward to seeing how it fulfils the initial goal of improving the British high street. In the words of Margaret Thatcher, we can never forget that Northern Ireland is as British as Finchley. We deserve similar, and I look forward to better understanding how that can be achieved in tandem with devolved Administrations.

4.30 pm

Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con) [V]: Well done to my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Paul Bristow) for securing this debate, and well done to him for his response to the initial intervention. We have heard much churlish moaning from Labour Members. Why did they not do something to help these towns when they were in government? It is this Conservative Government who are doing it.

I hugely support the town deal bid recently submitted by Leyland town board. Leyland is fabulous—it is where my parliamentary office is—but no one can say with a straight face that it has had its fair share of investment over the years. At the end of its main street, Hough Lane, stands the old Leyland works clock, which still says: “For all time”. Quite right. The trucks, fire engines and buses still grace the world—quality northern engineering—and we seek to build on that heritage.

Leyland town board was formed from local people, businesses, organisations and government officials, including—I declare an interest—me, and it is chaired by the fabulous businesswoman Jennifer Gadsdon, who deserves huge thanks and praise. We asked ourselves, “What does Leyland need to make a big positive change?” The answer forms part of the basis for our town deal bid to the Government.

We are competitively bidding for £21 million in Government grants to allow us, adding other funding in, to transform Hough Lane—outdoor space, streetscape and roadway—and create high-quality space for the community and businesses. We want to connect up bits of the town that have become separated, and create a market square and a green space. We want to regenerate our old market—refurbish, upgrade, expand—and we want to prime our natural commercial nous and skills with a dedicated base building for people to learn, work and grow.

It is three great connected ideas in one great bid. I look forward to the Government accepting our Leyland town deal bid and therefore investing in Leyland and building for our future.

4.32 pm

Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con) [V]: In Truro, we are at an exciting point; just last week, our investment plan was submitted to the Department for

consideration. A huge amount of work went into it by everyone involved, but I want to pay particular thanks to the chair of the Truro town fund board, Carole Theobald, and vice-chair Dr Alan Stanhope, as well as Mel Richardson and all board members, who have worked tirelessly to make the Truro plan exciting, thorough and optimistic for the future of Truro and for everyone who lives and works here. It has been a privilege to play just a small part, as part of that board, in the fantastic effort that has gone on.

Granted city status in 1876, Truro is Cornwall’s only city and situated at the head of the Fal estuary. Surrounded by farmland mid-way between Cornwall’s north and south coasts, it has always been a meeting place. Its natural assets—particularly the water—and location have made it a port, a trading and administrative capital, and a centre for skills and education. That continues today. Truro is the civic, retail and health centre for Cornwall, providing employment for 30,000 people, mainly in the public sector, with Cornwall Council’s headquarters on the edge of Truro, as well as Truro cathedral, the Royal Cornwall Hospital, and the Knowledge Spa, where I recently took part in the Novavax covid vaccine trial.

Last summer, when the covid regulations allowed, we welcomed my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to Truro to meet the Truro town fund team at the water’s edge to talk about plans we have to reconnect Truro to its three rivers. There used to be as many as 60 cargo ships using Truro and Newham as their home port. However, the silting of the river led to a decline in the sea trade after the second world war. Truro’s commercial centre appeared to fall out with its maritime past, and part of our bid aims to resurrect that relationship. Delivering that means overcoming many challenges that have held us back in the past.

So what do we want to achieve? We want to reinvigorate our neglected waterfront community spaces on Lemon Quay and provide a new community space where all residents are welcome to meet, learn new skills, access support and feel part of our evolving city. We want to create a sustainable transport solution, using new paths and cycle routes, and a bridge to connect the city, and digitally focused, new, innovative learning and living environments that will help to create jobs in high-growth and high-value businesses. We want to repurpose vacant buildings for commercial and residential use, breathing new life into the city centre while enhancing our heritage, and create an active leisure attraction, including an indoor climbing wall, water-based activities and sports facilities, as well as performance areas. This town deal is a chance to future-proof Truro for generations to come. By working with Government, we hope we can be ambitious for the future.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Jane, you are not going to get the full three minutes, and I will have to stop you at 4.38 pm.

4.35 pm

Jane Stevenson (Wolverhampton North East) (Con) [V]: I am delighted to sneak in to speak in this debate about the towns fund, which is a policy that will accelerate the Government’s levelling-up agenda and breathe new life into so many communities.

[Jane Stevenson]

As a born and bred Wulfrunian, I was delighted that Wolverhampton was one of the first places to be invited to bid for up to £25 million of investment. We submitted our bid last year and are eagerly awaiting some good news. Our board decided to submit a larger bid, as there is a clause in the prospectus allowing a proposal that is transformative of a wider region to bid for more money. Whether we meet the criterion is, I am sure, being considered as our bid is discussed, but I hope the bid makes clear the ambition and determination of Wolverhampton to generate, to regenerate and to prosper.

I am sorry that Opposition Members are seeking to politicise the towns fund. Wolverhampton has three parliamentary seats. Only one was a Conservative target seat before the last election, and we have a Labour council. I am really pleased that, while the Opposition is dividing the House, in Wolverhampton we are working together constructively on a cross-party basis with local businesses. Like many Wulfrunians, I have looked on as our city has declined, and I welcome this investment, which will lift up our city.

Since my election, we have already seen huge investment from this Conservative Government, with £16 million from the future high streets fund and £15 million for the national brownfield institute. I am hugely grateful to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government for engaging so enthusiastically on the towns fund and for putting up with my persistent lobbying. Most of our bid was focused on the city centre, but I was determined that places such as Bilston and Wednesfield, our two towns, should also benefit.

In the very short time I have left, I want to pay tribute to the people in Wednesfield. It is a brilliant place that has been in need of regeneration, and I have pushed at every stage to get local people involved in the decision making around the towns fund. I am pleased to say that I will be meeting some of our brilliant local traders this evening to talk about how the initial accelerated funding of an additional million-pound investment is already being spent to improve the local area. I am immensely grateful for the—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Sorry, we have to leave it there. We are going to try a timing-up clock for Patricia Gibson. You have six minutes, but the clock is just to help you.

4.38 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP) [V]: Before I begin, I wish to pay tribute to my predecessor in this role, my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), who has worked very hard. I wish him well in his new portfolio area.

I am delighted to participate in this debate on the towns fund, which was unveiled to great fanfare in July 2019. This is a fund totalling £3.6 billion that was billed as a means by which towns and cities could be levelled up—a laudable aim indeed, and well done to the towns that have been benefited. However, the towns fund is mired in controversy, and allegations of pork barrel politics simply will not go away. We have heard today from a number of Members about how nearly two thirds of the towns that were awarded funds were target Tory seats in the general election that followed, a mere

two months after the awards were made. Of the 100 towns invited to work with the Government on new town deals worth up to £25 million, 61 were in marginal seats.

Are we to believe that that was purely coincidence? What are the public supposed to think when towns in the constituencies of the two Housing Ministers who were involved in the distribution of the fund benefited weeks before an election? The Secretary of State will surely recall how, on the one hand, he denied any involvement in his constituency benefiting from a £25 million grant weeks before the general election, yet on the other hand, took credit during the campaign for that grant. That only feeds allegations and suspicions of pork barrel politics.

What we do know is that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government drew up a ranked priority list of towns for the fund based on need and the potential for development, and another 61 medium and low-priority locations were also chosen. The smell is so bad that the Public Accounts Committee, in a damning report, concluded that it was

“not convinced by the rationales for selecting some towns and not others”,

with the justifications offered by Ministers for selecting individual towns being

“vague and based on sweeping assumptions”,

and that the system gave

“every appearance of having been politically motivated”.

This damning report is even more astonishing when we consider that the majority of the members of the Public Accounts Committee are Tory MPs. That may seem to members of the public to be what, in common parlance, might be called a fair cop.

That is why there is so much concern about the shared prosperity fund, which is also looking suspiciously like it might be perceived as just another political tool. We still do not know how the shared prosperity fund will work or when it will be made available, but we do know that the Scottish Government consultation on this fund shows a clear majority favouring a Scottish-led fund, reflecting Scottish policy priorities. We remember the grand words of the Communities Minister in 2019, when he said that, as far as the UK prosperity fund was concerned, the devolution settlement would be respected. Let us hope that that will be the case.

There is growing unease about how public funds, as in the case of the towns fund, which are supposed to be for the promotion of the public good, instead are used for political ends. That has been followed by questions about a lack of transparency and accountability in how public money is being spent, with regard to the towns fund and the awarding of contracts generally. This is why my hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) has brought forward a private Member's Bill that seeks much greater accountability and transparency for the public purse. If towns funds are truly to help towns, the deployment of cash must be more transparent and based on need.

The stench around the towns fund is pretty strong, and it is deeply concerning if the same questionable criteria are applied to the UK prosperity fund. Public money is just that: it is the public's money, not a resource to be deployed for political or other purposes. It must be used transparently and in the public's interest. I say to the Minister that if something smells very bad, it is often because it is very bad. So what assurances can

the Minister give this House, following the publication of the Public Accounts Committee report? To address concerns about the administration of the UK prosperity fund, will he commit today to ensuring that it will be administered by the Scottish Government and that the devolution settlement will be respected, as was promised, when this fund eventually sees the light of day?

4.43 pm

Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): The Government like to talk about levelling up the country, but sadly their record shows they have done the precise opposite. Since they were first elected in 2010, the Conservative Government have imposed £15 billion-worth of cuts on local authorities, and they did not share the pain equally either. The 10 poorest council areas have faced cuts 18 times bigger than the 10 richest, as the Government embedded inequality. Initially, the Conservatives' failed ideological austerity stalled Britain's economic recovery after the global financial crash. Last year, they left the country so woefully unprepared for the covid-19 pandemic that we are now suffering the highest death rate in Europe and the deepest recession of any major economy.

Right now, many of our towns and high streets are at breaking point. After a decade of Conservative cuts and now the recession, they are on their last legs. Councils cannot support high street businesses because the Government have left councils with a £2.5 billion funding black hole, after breaking their promise to compensate them fully for the costs of tackling covid-19.

Conservative changes to planning rules allow developers to convert shops into low-quality flats, so that they can never reopen as shops again, creating dead zones on our high streets. Now the Government plan to choke off spending on the hope of rapid economic recovery by forcing council tax rises on families already struggling to pay the bills in these unprecedented times.

The Government spent the past decade levelling the country down, stripping out jobs, assets and investments from parts of the country they chose to hold back. They have closed nearly 800 libraries, 750 youth centres, 1,300 Sure Start centres and more than 800 public toilets. That is political vandalism on our high streets, but it goes much further than that. They have deliberately pulled our country apart by deepening and entrenching inequality. Whole regions have been starved of investment, leaving them without the infrastructure, jobs or skills to attract good new employers. People should not have to leave the towns they live in to find a decent job because all that is available back home are the low-skill, low-paid, insecure jobs that are a hallmark of this Government's economic neglect.

As my hon. Friends the Members for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) and for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) have said, opportunity should be open to everyone, wherever they live. Aspiration should not be capped because someone lives in a part of the country that the Conservatives chose to abandon. Social care should be an entitlement, not a lucky dip. Our high streets deserve a brighter future than the long stretches of graffiti-covered shutters that are the visible legacy of Conservative misrule.

As my hon. Friends the Members for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols) and for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) point out, the towns fund is a wholly inadequate fix for how the lost Conservative decade has

blighted our high streets. The Government stripped out £15 billion of funding, and now they expect gratitude for giving less than a quarter of that money back.

Some funding is better than no funding, and we support those areas lucky enough to get something, but what about everywhere else? The vast majority of towns and high streets are getting nothing at all, as we heard from my hon. Friends the Members for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett), for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) and for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer), my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) and my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders). Instead of the open and fair process that communities want to see, the Conservatives are stitching up backroom deals that carve most towns out of the funding they so desperately need.

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con) *rose*—

Steve Reed: I am sorry, there is not going to be time. How embarrassing, yet how typical of this Government that the Secretary of State and the right hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry) stitch up a cosy deal to funnel public money into each other's constituencies, taking it from towns and high streets with higher levels of deprivation. The Conservatives are pulling our country apart. Labour wants to see our country come back together again. People living in every town in the country deserve their fair share of investments.

The real yardstick of success would be if the towns fund put new opportunities on people's doorsteps in every town and made every part of the country a good place to set up home and aspire to a better future, but that is not what we are seeing. The Public Accounts Committee says that the Government are unclear what they expect from the funding or how they will measure its success. That simply is not good enough.

Many new Conservative Members, as we have heard this afternoon, like to trumpet how towns in their constituencies were selected to benefit from funding, but they are remarkably quiet, are they not, about the much bigger sums of money the Conservative Government took away from those places in the first place. The Conservatives took £275 million away from Bishop Auckland's local council. They took £165 million away from Blackpool. They raided £203 million from Crewe, £324 million from Penistone and Stocksbridge, and £197 million from Wakefield. The towns fund gives back only a tiny proportion of what the Conservatives have already stripped away. It is like a burglar breaking into a house in the dead of night, stripping it bare and then expecting thanks for handing back the TV set.

We will not secure the economic recovery by killing off our high streets, and we will not protect the NHS by starving older people of the social care they need. We will not rebuild our country by choking off spending with a Conservative council tax hike that is timed to hit hard-pressed family budgets just as the furlough scheme comes to an end. If the Conservatives really want to bring lasting prosperity to towns and regions that they have held back, they have to do better than the towns fund. This country needs a real plan to bring jobs and investment to every town and high street, not the short-term fixes and back-room deals cobbled together by the same Government who pushed our high streets to the brink of disaster in the first place.

4.49 pm

The Minister for Regional Growth and Local Government (Luke Hall): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Paul Bristow) and the Backbench Business Committee on securing what has been an important and passionate debate. We have heard colleagues on both sides of the House speak with passion and enthusiasm about the communities they represent. I am hugely grateful to colleagues on both sides of the House for their contributions, and I will try to address as many of the points raised as possible.

This debate has given us a chance to celebrate the towns fund, which is a cornerstone of our levelling-up agenda. It is helping to reshape towns and cities into places where businesses and communities can thrive. In 2019, we announced that 101 places had been invited to develop proposals for a town deal. The objective of these deals is to drive the regeneration of towns to deliver long-term economic and productivity growth. It has been genuinely inspiring to see town deal boards, communities and representatives of individual places work with local government to do just that.

These towns are spread right across the country. Many are birthplaces of industry that have been centres of commerce for centuries. Others are bastions of the maritime economy across the coastline. They are all different, but the thing they have in common is that they have been left behind as investment has focused on big cities for too long. Town deals are reversing that trend. They are about providing investment and confidence at a crucial time for these communities. We are investing in new uses for often derelict and unloved spaces. We are creating new cultural and economic assets that will benefit communities for years to come, and we are connecting people through better infrastructure, both digital and physical, such as the new walking and cycling routes planned at Torquay and the creation of a new digi-tech factory in Norwich.

It is unsurprising and disappointing to see the Labour party today trot out the same tired old lines attacking this fund, which is investing so much in towns that were neglected for years under the last Labour Government. We heard Labour Members say again today that this fund has been targeted at Conservative-held areas. They are wrong. The majority of towns selected are in either Labour or Opposition-held local authority areas. Those councils have worked with us co-operatively, passionately trying to put together their bids, to deliver investment in their communities, but the Labour party in Westminster is determined to reject the support for those communities and attack these local regeneration projects in towns and cities that they neglected for years and years.

Stephanie Peacock: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way, but I am afraid he is completely wrong. Sixty out of 61 towns selected by Ministers were in Conservative-held or Conservative target seats. Barnsley, which I represent, has had the biggest cuts in the country. How could we possibly not have been considered for the fund?

Luke Hall: I ask the hon. Lady to check the facts. The majority of these town deals are in Opposition-held council areas.

I was delighted to hear the hon. Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) open her speech by saying that no Labour MP will oppose more funding for local

government, because she will have the opportunity shortly to vote for a local government finance settlement that will increase councils' core spending power by 4.5%—a real-terms increase.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) asked about funding for Northern Ireland and how the Department for International Trade's high potential opportunities programme is supporting investment across the UK. I can confirm that DIT announced in October the second round of successful bids, with 19 new projects selected, and it is currently working with Invest Northern Ireland to explore even more investment opportunities. I am sure that colleagues in the Department for International Trade will be happy to pick that up with him.

In the face of this relentless negativity from the Labour party, in October last year we announced the first seven towns to have gone through the assessment process and have their plans approved. Among them was Peterborough. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough worked closely with the town deal board and helped to develop the ambitious investment plan. I am delighted that it was offered £22.9 million in October. That funding will help to deliver a new enterprise hub to support entrepreneurs and inward investment. It will support healthy lifestyles by making it easier to walk and cycle, and it will further Peterborough's ambitions for low-carbon living. I thank my hon. Friend and his town board for all their support and help in making this happen.

I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton) for his remarks this afternoon. It is in large part down to his hard work, alongside that of the town deal board, that Blackpool will receive £39.5 million. This substantial investment reflects the exceptional nature of Blackpool's proposals and the national significance of what they are planning. We think investing in this iconic British seaside resort has benefits that will reach way beyond the boundaries of the town. The plans include making Blackpool's famous illuminations even more impressive so that they can attract visitors right around the year and have a huge impact on tourism in the town.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) raised his ambitions for the Goole to Leeds rail link and asked whether we could retain some flexibility in delivering the fund to support places requesting revenue funding as part of the deal. I would say to him that the towns fund criteria are broadly drawn, and intentionally so, to ensure that we give towns as much flexibility as possible to determine their own priorities. It is right that the towns fund is principally about capital investments, but we recognise that in some towns there might be a particular need for an amount of revenue funding, perhaps to support the implementation of a capital project, so we absolutely agree with that.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) talked passionately about his town investment plan, which we received in late October last year. I can assure him that the assessment process is under way and my officials are looking at the details of the plan. I agree with him that it provides the opportunity for Harlow to determine its own future, and I will certainly join him in thanking the Harlow growth board, the chief executive of the council and all the officers who have worked on the bid.

Alongside town deals, we are also investing directly in the high streets that are at the heart of so many of our communities. Too many high streets have seen considerable decline in the past decades, and those challenges have been exacerbated over the last year by covid-19. That is why, on Boxing day, we announced the winners of our future high streets competition, committing up to £830 million to 72 places in England and giving a major boost to local high streets and the many jobs and livelihoods that depend on them.

That investment includes over £11 million for Blyth, which was raised in the debate by my hon. Friend the Member for Blyth Valley (Ian Levy). This will deliver important new cultural and educational facilities and bring vibrancy to the town centre. The investment also includes nearly £18 million for Worcester city centre, which will benefit from the renovation of the popular theatre and the Corn Exchange, and £25 million for Swindon to modernise its town centre. Some £107 million from the future high streets fund has also been allocated to support the regeneration of heritage high streets, and we are doing everything possible to help high streets to survive, adapt and thrive.

My hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough also talked about the need to do more and go further, and he was right to do so, because there is of course more investment to come. At the spending review, we announced the levelling up fund, worth £4 billion, and that will bring infrastructure investment—

Antony Higginbotham: Burnley is looking forward not only to the levelling up fund but to the competitive round of the towns fund. May I ask my hon. Friend to look sympathetically at Burnley's bid when that scheme opens, because we have such ambitious plans not only for Burnley town centre but for Padiham, too?

Luke Hall: My hon. Friend is a passionate advocate for his constituency and I know he will champion any bids that come in, as he is absolutely right to do. I am of course always happy to speak to him about his representations.

The levelling-up fund will be open to all local areas and allocated competitively. We will prioritise bids that drive growth and regeneration in the places that need it most—those places that face particular local challenges in upgrading their infrastructure and those that have received less Government investment in recent years. We are also developing the UK shared prosperity fund, which will succeed EU structural funds and provide vital investment in local economies, free of the bureaucracy that thwarted European funding. The new fund will allow us to target funding better and support those who are most in need. The towns fund, the levelling-up fund and the UKSPF will be vital tools for levelling up in our country.

I thank all Members for their contributions to this debate. The Government are levelling up: we want everybody, wherever they live, to benefit from increased growth and prosperity, and the towns fund is helping us to achieve that. We are investing in the places that need it most and putting local communities in charge of the decisions that affect them. The towns fund marks just the start of that. There is, of course, much more investment to come and much more to do through the levelling-up fund and the UK shared prosperity fund. We want to see more towns such as Barrow, Torquay, Blackpool and Mansfield benefit so that everybody, wherever they live in our great country, can be part of a brighter and more prosperous future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Towns Fund.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): As the Adjournment debate is entirely physical, I thank the technicians and broadcasting unit for all their help in facilitating the work of Parliament this week. In order for Members to leave safely and to allow the sanitisation of the Dispatch Boxes, we will suspend for a brief moment before the Adjournment debate.

5 pm

Sitting suspended.

Driving Tests: High Wycombe

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

5.2 pm

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to hold this Adjournment debate. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Minister for her attendance and I thank my hon. Friend the Minister in the Lords, Baroness Vere, for a helpful and constructive meeting on this subject.

It is essential that we have driving tests in High Wycombe, yet the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency plans to close our local test centre. Wycombe's driving instructors, of whom there are around 100, have estimated there are thousands of learner drivers in our town, as is reflected in the number of tests taken each year.

In October 2020, local driving instructors, students and parents were informed that the Wellington Road test site will close on 12th March

“given the low demand for driving tests”.

However, I am told by Wycombe's instructors that our town has been a popular location to conduct driving tests for around 45 years.

DVSA statistics show that the High Wycombe driving test centre has conducted more tests than both Aylesbury and Uxbridge in the past eight out of nine years. In the year 2018-19, there were 5,549 driving tests in High Wycombe, compared with 4,323 in Aylesbury and 4,847 in Uxbridge. High Wycombe's driving test centre also ranked 136th out of 349 in terms of the number of tests carried out in the country in the same year.

Driving instructors in my constituency tell me that Slough has eight driving test examiners, but High Wycombe has only two. Although our town had five in 2017, over time the number has been decreased. The Office for National Statistics population estimate for mid-2019 shows that Wycombe has a larger population, at 174,268, than Slough, at 149,539. To put it perhaps more simply, Slough has 85% of Wycombe's population but four times the number of examiners at its driving test centre. That is difficult to reconcile. Our town should have more examiners to carry out driving tests. ONS figures show that between 2011 and 2019, High Wycombe saw a population increase of 0.35% a year. Although the coronavirus restrictions have halted the driving instruction industry of late, we hope soon to see driving lessons resume. If our town's population continues to grow, demand for tests in Wycombe could soar.

Should Wycombe's driving test centre close, the DVSA has indicated that driving instructors and students would have to carry out tests at other centres. The sites on offer are at Aylesbury, Uxbridge and Slough, but the journey from High Wycombe to either test centre is just over 30 minutes in good traffic. To be clear, the journey from Wycombe High Street to Aylesbury, according to Google Maps, in typical traffic is about 38 minutes; to Slough, it is 39 minutes; and to Uxbridge, it is 41 minutes. That is only one way, and it is too far.

It is crucial that we continue to have driving tests in High Wycombe by one of three means: first, by extending the Wellington Road lease, which I understand would be expensive; secondly, by finding a new test centre in our town; or thirdly, by moving over to mobile testing.

Following a Transport Committee evidence session on 25 November 2020, the DVSA's chief executive said that a “meet and greet system” is being considered, suggesting that that might become a pattern for the future. If this proposal is taken forward, he suggested that examiners might meet candidates at supermarkets or leisure centres. This solution seems to offer a reduced cost to the DVSA, potentially eliminating the fixed costs of driving test centres, but I think driving instructors in Wycombe would want me to say that we need to make provision for them to wait while tests are conducted.

I appreciate that the DVSA's concerns about the lease cost of the present test centre at Wellington Road are significant. At £80,000, it is a substantial sum. Moving to a new test site in High Wycombe could be a solution to this predicament that appealed to all parties involved. In October 2020, the DVSA said that it would consider alternative sites to the centre at Wellington Road, setting out a criterion for its requirements.

In common with majority opinion in Wycombe, I believe that the DVSA would like to see driving tests in our town, which is why I am delighted that the hub space at Cressex business park is currently under review. At a reduced fee of a little over £12,000, I am told by driving instructors that the DVSA is planning to apply for planning permission and, though contracts are not finalised, progress looks encouraging. I very much hope that this is the case and that Buckinghamshire Council will look favourably on any application. I would be very grateful if my hon. Friend confirmed that that is a possibility.

There is a demand for driving tests in High Wycombe. That demand is represented in my inbox, so I am reassured that the Minister is working closely with the independent DVSA to make sure that my constituents have access to driving tests in our town. If the DVSA lets the Wellington Road driving test centre expire on 12 March, will the Minister please ensure that there is a seamless transition to either mobile testing or the hub space on 13 March? High Wycombe should not have to go without driving tests, and any transition should be smooth and uninterrupted.

I am grateful to the DVSA for seriously working towards leasing the hub space at Cressex business park, so may I ask what the length of the contract is that the DVSA intends to enter into? As the coronavirus restrictions are eased, instructors and students need clarity to plan where they will teach, where they will learn and where they will take tests.

Finally, will the Minister please seek to recruit more examiners in Wycombe? I support local instructors' calls for a driving test centre in High Wycombe with at least five examiners. Although this would still be fewer than the eight provided to Slough, Wycombe ought to see a return to the number in 2017, at which point the DVSA can then make a further assessment about whether more are needed.

If we were not to have driving tests in High Wycombe, instructors and learners would be forced to drive to test sites in the surrounding area, with a round-trip distance of over 30 miles. Notwithstanding the environmental impact that this would have on the surrounding areas of outstanding natural beauty, this could also be a serious economic blow for instructors and for many in the town.

Many driving instructors have already seen their income dry up due to the coronavirus restrictions, and many have not qualified for Government support for the self-employed, being over the £50,000 threshold.

If students are forced to take their driving test in other town centres, it is expected that they will want to learn to drive in the area where the test will be held—Aylesbury, Uxbridge or Slough. As a result, students could find that they are hiring driving instructors in those areas, rather than in High Wycombe. Of course, our instructors have years of experience in our town and would want to continue training and testing people there, rather than seeing tests move away to other centres. For that reason, the closure of our test centre could be a serious blow to many, not just a mere inconvenience.

Closure would, of course, have a financial impact on learner drivers from low-income backgrounds. In a written question last month, I asked the Department for Transport what impact assessment DVSA had done to ensure that people living on a low income in Wycombe would not be disadvantaged by having to travel to another test centre. The answer seemed not to indicate that an impact assessment had been carried out.

It is normal for students across the country to practise test routes with their instructor. If learner students from Wycombe were forced to travel to other sites, they would need extended lessons to do so. According to Wycombe's driving instructors, the fee for an hour's lesson is about £32. However, we have established that a round trip to Aylesbury, Uxbridge or Slough takes a little over an hour in good traffic. Therefore, students would find themselves paying £64 for a two-hour lesson when one hour would have done in High Wycombe. For many, that could become untenable.

I can accept that it is easy to assume that High Wycombe is part of the economically successful south-east economy, and of course plenty of my constituents are well off, but my constituency has wards that fall within some of the lowest percentiles for deprivation. Levelling up, as I have pointed out to other Ministers, must not just neglect people who are hidden by taking averages across a constituency.

With just over five weeks to go until the test centre's lease in High Wycombe expires, my constituents urgently need clarity, so I would be very grateful for any that my hon. Friend the Minister can give. I am certain that we need driving tests in our town, whether that means extending the lease at Wellington Road, turning to mobile testing or securing a long-term lease at Cressex business park's hub space. I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for the urgent work that she has done on this subject, and indeed to our noble Friend Baroness Vere in the other place. I would be grateful for any reassurance she can provide.

5.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Rachel Maclean): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) for securing this debate, and also for the incredibly informative way he has laid out the case for the continuation of driving tests in High Wycombe, which has left no Members of the House in any doubt about his passion on the subject—we would expect nothing less from him, of course. I know that he has been engaging closely with the Transport Secretary and with our noble Friend the Minister in the other place on this issue in recent weeks, making the case for

the importance of retaining the ability to conduct tests in High Wycombe. I also want to put on the record my thanks to the driving instructors he has been discussing the matter with.

My hon. Friend has made very clear to us the impact on his constituents of having to undertake long journeys to alternative testing sites, were there not to be any testing sites available in High Wycombe. He has mentioned the financial and environmental impacts of people having to take long journeys to access alternative sites. He made a very good point about the importance of not forgetting that levelling up applies to every constituency in the country, not just those we traditionally think it might do.

I am very pleased to conform from the Dispatch Box today that, as a result of my hon. Friend's efforts, and the hard work and dedication that he has put into the campaign, the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency is progressing a proposal to maintain driving tests in High Wycombe. The agency is at an advanced stage of discussions with a new landlord. As he has already laid out, the current driving test centre in High Wycombe is a large two-storey industrial estate on the Cressex business park. The site can accommodate 15-plus driving examiners. However, the demand for tests at High Wycombe from customers means that just two examiners work there permanently. The accommodation is much too large, and it attracts high running costs, as he has acknowledged. It makes little financial sense to the DVSA or its customers to continue operating out of such a site.

The DVSA has a tried and tested procedure for when it needs to vacate a driving test centre. That is why, in September 2020, it began stakeholder engagement with those who could be affected. The pandemic ruled out the possibility of a face-to-face meeting. However, I am pleased to say that the agency was able to hold an online meeting in October 2020 for many of those affected—including, no doubt, many of the driving instructors my hon. Friend has been talking about. The DVSA explained during that meeting why it was necessary to take advantage of the lease break at the Wellington Road site and, while it was confident it could service demand at other nearby driving test centres, the DVSA said it would consider low-cost alternative options to enable it to continue offering a local service in High Wycombe, were any such premises available. The DVSA recognises the concerns of local driving instructors in High Wycombe, and it understands fully their determination to maintain a driving test centre there. It is very grateful to the instructor community for engaging with it to help it look for low-cost alternative premises.

As I mentioned earlier, the DVSA is now progressing with a proposal to maintain driving tests. I am sure my hon. Friend will be further pleased to know that these premises are also located on the Cressex business park, which is the location of the existing driving test centre. That would mean minimal disruption during the transition from the old premises to the proposed new site. The DVSA is keen to keep to a minimum any break in service between the closure of the existing centre and the opening of the new one, but this will be subject to a number of factors, such as planning, over which the DVSA has no control. Naturally, I understand that my hon. Friend would want to know exactly how long that period is going to be; in fact, I think he might be wishing to ask me that question.

Mr Baker: I just want to say how absolutely delighted I am that the Minister has confirmed that we will continue to have driving tests. It is fantastic news, and I pay tribute to the driving instructors for the brilliant campaign they have run, all the research they have done, and their engagement with DVSA. I will just put on the record that I very much hope that Buckinghamshire Council will look favourably on this planning application; if they did not, I think local residents would be extremely surprised. I thank the Government very much for what they have done.

Rachel Maclean: I welcome my hon. Friend's remarks, and associate myself with his comments about Buckinghamshire Council. To be clear, that is a matter for the local planners, not for me, but we will of course work very closely with my hon. Friend on the questions he has raised with me, specifically about the length of the lease. We will also keep him informed about any progress in determining the final securing of these premises for driving tests in High Wycombe.

In closing, I am pleased to again put on record my thanks to my hon. Friend. As a result of the campaign that he and the local community have run, the DVSA is at an advanced stage of discussions with a landlord of premises on the Cressex business park in High Wycombe for a new driving centre there. I thank you very much for the opportunity to discuss this matter in the Chamber this evening, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): An Adjournment debate with a happy ending. Congratulations to all involved.

Question put and agreed to.

5.17 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 4 February 2021

TREASURY

HMRC Powers and Safeguards

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman):

On 22 July 2019, I announced a comprehensive package of measures that HMRC was taking to maintain and develop public trust in its operations (HCWS1785). Today, HMRC has published a major part of this package, a report on its evaluation of the implementation of powers introduced since 2012: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/evaluation-of-hmrcs-implementation-of-powers-obligations-and-safeguards>.

I asked HMRC to engage with stakeholders, including taxpayers and their representatives, and I am very grateful, in particular, to the 16 external stakeholder organisations that have offered constructive challenge to HMRC throughout the evaluation.

Alongside changes that HMRC is already introducing, the evaluation has highlighted further opportunities for improvements that will build and maintain public trust in the tax system. HMRC is making a number of commitments as a result of the evaluation. These include commitments to improve communications with taxpayers about powers, obligations and compliance enquiries; to update and clarify guidance on taxpayers' rights and obligations; to increase awareness of HMRC's internal decision-making and governance processes; and to make further improvements to taxpayers' customer experience. The commitments are designed to ensure that HMRC consistently meets the high standards that taxpayers expect, including those who do not have a tax agent, and especially when people may need extra support.

All but one of the measures that I announced in my July 2019 statement have now been delivered by HMRC. They have created the new professional standards committee, published responses to the 2019 and 2020 adjudicator's reports, and published new principles regarding help for taxpayers who may need extra support.

HMRC has also expanded the range of data published regularly to include new data that will help taxpayers to understand how HMRC approaches compliance work and how it uses relevant powers, and to assess the effectiveness of HMRC's safeguards for taxpayers.

On the final measure I announced in my July 2019 statement, HMRC continues to take forward a range of actions to improve taxpayer experience. It has reviewed and improved over six hundreds of HMRC's most commonly used letters and factsheets, simplifying the language used. It has put processes in place to keep letters under review, and to respond where further areas for improvement are identified. Last year HMRC also set up a new Extra Support Team to improve its identification of, and assistance to, taxpayers who may need additional help during compliance checks. HMRC has already responded to over 1,000 referrals and provided training to nearly 12,000 caseworkers.

HMRC has also made substantial progress in other areas. In particular, it is continuing to strengthen the guidance available to taxpayers to help them understand better the compliance check process, in order to reduce any stress involved and to build greater confidence and trust in HMRC. In December, HMRC launched a series of bitesize YouTube videos on key aspects of this process, and it is also trialling a new introductory pack which taxpayers will receive when a compliance check is opened.

HMRC's programme of work on powers and safeguards is an important contribution towards the vision that the Government set out in July 2020 for a trusted and modern tax administration system. HMRC will implement the commitments in this report and continue to work with taxpayers, tax agents and their representatives, to maintain and develop public trust in their operations.

[HCWS762]

Public Service Pensions Consultation

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Steve Barclay):

The Government published a consultation document (CP 253, HCWS380) in July 2020 outlining proposals regarding public service pensions. I have today laid in Parliament the Government's response to the consultation: "Public service pension schemes: changes to the transitional arrangements to the 2015 schemes. Government response to consultation" (CP 373).

The main public service pension schemes were reformed in 2015 to make them fairer—especially for lower earners—and more affordable for the taxpayer. Public service pensions continue to be among the best in the workplace, providing a generous level of pension provision for public servants. Following negotiations with trade unions and other member representative bodies, the Government agreed that those closer to retirement should be either fully or partially protected from the changes and allowed to remain in their legacy schemes, known as "transitional protection". In December 2018 this transitional protection was found by the Court of Appeal to discriminate unlawfully against younger judges and firefighters who were members of the legacy schemes before 1 April 2012 but did not benefit from transitional protection. The reformed schemes themselves are not discriminatory. As set out in the July 2019 written statement (HCWS1725), the Government accepted that the ruling reads across to other public service pension schemes, affecting around 3 million public servants.

In July 2020 I launched a consultation, seeking views on proposals to address this. More than 3,000 responses to the consultation were received, and the Treasury also conducted engagement sessions with a wide range of stakeholders. I am grateful for the many responses to the consultation we received from public servants, employers, administrators, financial advisers, trade unions and member representative bodies. They were insightful and crucial for further developing the Government's proposals, understanding the impacts of the proposals, and coming to informed decisions.

Having considered the responses to the consultation, the Government are today announcing that they will implement the deferred choice underpin (DCU). This will give eligible scheme members a choice at the point their pension becomes payable as to whether they wish

to receive benefits from their legacy scheme or benefits equivalent to those that would have been available under their reformed schemes in relation to their service between 1 April 2015 and 31 March 2022. In the meantime, eligible members will be deemed to have been members of their legacy schemes for any period of service between those dates.

In implementing the DCU, rather than an immediate choice exercise, we have recognised that members will have more certainty around their personal circumstances at the point they need to make their choice. This approach considerably reduces the need for members to make assumptions around their future career, their retirement, health and dependants, which would increase the risk of members, particularly younger members, making an incorrect decision. I strongly believe that the DCU is the correct approach, given its key advantage of providing members with greater certainty about their choice of pension benefits.

I am also confirming that the legacy schemes will close on 31 March 2022. From 1 April 2022, all those who remain in service will do so as members of the reformed schemes that were introduced in 2015. Benefits built up in the legacy schemes will be protected.

The reasons for closing the legacy schemes and moving to the reformed schemes are as valid now as they were when the reforms were introduced: the schemes should continue to provide guaranteed pension benefits to public servants, but do so on a fairer basis, and in a way that ensures that they are affordable and sustainable into the future. Public service pensions continue to reward public servants generously for their dedicated service.

The Government will bring forward new primary legislation, when parliamentary time allows, to provide requisite powers to deliver these changes to public service pension schemes.

Cost control mechanism and 2020 valuations update

Alongside the launch of the consultation in July 2020,¹ announced that the pause to the cost control mechanism—which was introduced as a consequence of the uncertainty regarding the value of schemes to members resulting from the court judgments—would be lifted, and the cost control element of the 2016 valuations process completed. I also announced that the Government Actuary (GA) would proceed with the review to assess whether the mechanism is operating as intended.

As I previously set out, the increased value of schemes to members as a result of the McCloud remedy will be taken into account in the completion of the 2016 valuations. Given that this will lead to higher costs than would otherwise have been expected, early estimates indicate that sortie schemes could breach the ceiling. If normal statutory procedure were followed, any ceiling breaches would lead to a reduction in member benefits in order to bring costs back to target. The GA review is ongoing, and I have decided that it would be inappropriate to reduce member benefits based on a mechanism that may not be working as intended.

This means any ceiling breaches that do occur during the completion of the 2016 valuations will therefore not be implemented, and benefit levels will not be reduced. However, I have also decided that should any floor breaches occur, they will be honoured, and member

benefits increased in order to bring costs back to target. These decisions apply only to the cost control element of the 2016 valuations. Future cost control policy for future valuations will be set out once the GA's review of the mechanism has concluded and any recommendations have been fully considered by the Government.

Changes in the employer contribution rates resulting from the 2020 valuations process were due to be implemented from April 2023 for the majority of unfunded public service pension schemes. These valuations have already begun, and require intensive work across schemes, Departments and the Government Actuary's Department (GAD) over several years.

Due to interactions with wider pension policies, in particular the implementation of the McCloud remedy reforms, completion of the 2016 valuation process and the review of the cost control mechanism, work would need to be undertaken in unprecedentedly short timescales to amend employer contribution rates in April 2023.

Any changes to employer contribution rates resulting from the 2020 valuations will therefore be delayed from April 2023 to April 2024. This is an exceptional but necessary decision taken in light of the wider public service pensions landscape.

Today's announcements set out the steps the Government will take to ensure that members of public service pension schemes are treated equally—taking an approach which is fair for members as well as other taxpayers.

Copies of the Government's response document to the consultation (CP 373) are available in the Vote Office and Printed Paper Office, and it is published on gov.uk.

[HCWS757]

Van benefit and Car and Van Fuel Benefit Order 2021

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Kemi Badenoch): The van benefit charge and fuel benefit charges for cars and vans will be uprated by the consumer price index from 6 April 2021. The uprate will take effect as follows:

Van Benefit Charge will uprate from £3,490 to £3,500

Car Fuel Benefit Charge multiplier will uprate from £24,500 to £24,600

Van Fuel Benefit Charge will uprate from £666 to £669

This measure is being announced outside of the normal fiscal process to ensure employers and HMRC are given enough time to prepare for the uprate, ahead of the 2021-22 tax year.

The Government will lay the statutory instrument to uprate these charges before the House on 9 March 2021. A tax information and impact note (TIIN) will be published at Budget 2021 and will be available at www.gov.uk/government/collections/tax-information-and-impact-notes-tiins.

[HCWS763]

DEFENCE

Votes A Annual Estimate

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace): The Ministry of Defence Votes A Estimate 2021-22 will be laid before the House on 4 February 2021 as HC 1125.

This outlines the maximum numbers of personnel to be maintained for each service in the armed forces during financial year 2021-22.

[HCWS759]

Votes A Supplementary Votes

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace): The Ministry of Defence Votes A Supplementary Votes 2020-21 will be laid before the House on 4 February 2021 as HC 1126. This outlines the increased maximum numbers of personnel to be maintained for service in the Army Reserve full-time service (FTRS) and Air Force during financial year 2020-21.

[HCWS760]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Covid-19

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): On 5 January 2021, the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (All Tiers) (England) Regulations 2020 (All Tier Regulations) were amended. These amendments instructed people across England to stay at home and only to leave where they have a legally permitted reasonable excuse, as well as requiring the closure of many businesses and venues.

We are getting the virus under control, however the numbers of covid-19 cases, hospital and ICU admissions, and deaths remain extremely high nationally. As a result, our hospitals are still under significant pressure from covid-19.

As of 1 February, the weekly case rate in England has decreased to 294 per 100,000 for all ages, compared to a rate of 421 the week before and 233 per 100,000 in people aged 60 and over, in comparison to 332 per 100,000. There are seven local authorities with case rates greater than 500 per 100,000. Overall positivity for England is 11.9%, which is a 1.8% decrease over the last seven days.

Case rates for all ages have decreased but remain high or very high across all regions. Case rates also remain very high in the west midlands (350 per 100,000), the east of England (308 per 100,000) and the north-west (320 per 100,000). The lowest case rates are in the south-west (200 per 100,000)—a 30% decrease from last week. The highest positivity is in London (22%) and lowest in the south-west (6.9%).

The measures the Government have put in place are bringing down the number of cases/ However, these figures are significantly higher in comparison to early December, and there still remains considerable pressure on NHS systems nationwide as although hospitalisations are now decreasing, bed occupancy is still high and remains ~50% above the peak of the first wave. General and acute bed occupancy for covid-19 across England has decreased by 4,023 to 26,216 from 30,239 last week. Mechanical ventilation bed occupancy for covid-19 across England has similarly decreased to 3,366 from 3,736 in the previous week. Deaths within 28 days of a positive test remain high: there have been 7,898 covid-19 related deaths in England from 18 January to 24 January 2021.

In line with our commitments, I have kept the measures in place for the national lockdown under ongoing review. On 2 February I completed a review of the geographical allocations as required by the regulations and have determined that it is necessary for all areas in England to remain in tier 4 in order to tackle the threat posed by the covid-19. Whilst there are early indications that new infections may have started to decline in those areas which have been under stricter measures for the longest, scientific advice and the latest epidemiological data are clear that lifting restrictions now would be too early. We recognise the strain that these restrictions have placed on people across the country, but we must continue to take the necessary steps to slow the spread of the virus, protect the NHS and save lives. The restrictions are kept under continual review and will be lifted as soon as it is safe to do so.

[HCWS761]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Police Grant Report (England and Wales)

The Minister for Crime and Policing (Kit Malthouse): My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has today laid before the House the “Police Grant Report (England and Wales) 2021/22” (HC 1162). The report sets out the Home Secretary’s determination for 2021-22 of the aggregate amount of grants that she proposes to pay under section 46(2) of the Police Act 1996. Copies of the report are available from the Vote Office.

The allocations that have been laid before the House today are as set out in my statement and provisional police grant report of 17 December 2020.

Available funding to police and crime commissioners (PCCs) is made up of Government grants and police precept. The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government has today set out the council tax referendum principles that will apply to the police precept, for approval by the House of Commons.

Council tax levels are a local decision and elected PCCs will rightly want to consider what they are asking people to pay to fulfil their strong desire to keep our streets safe.

The council tax referendum principles are not a cap, nor do they force local authorities to set taxes at the threshold level. Rather they are an additional local democratic check to prevent excessive increases. The forthcoming PCC elections also provide an opportunity for local taxpayers to have their say on the spending decisions of their elected representatives.

In 2021-22, the overall funding settlement for the policing system will total up to £15.8 billion, a £636 million increase on the 2020-21 funding settlement.

Depending on local decisions, available funding to PCCs could increase next year by up to an additional £703 million. This would represent an increase to PCC funding of up to 5.4% in cash terms on the 2020-21 police funding settlement. If the public were asked to approve greater increases via a local referendum, and voted for such changes, precept funding would increase accordingly.

The table, available as an online attachment, documents funding to PCCs for 2021-22, including capital grant and precept.

Attachments can be viewed at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2021-02-04/HCWS758/>.

[HCWS758]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local Government Finance Settlement

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick): Today I laid before the House the “Report on Local Government Finance (England) 2021-22”, the “Council Tax referendum principles report 2021-22” and “Council Tax alternative notional amounts report 2021-2022”, which together form the annual local Government finance settlement for local authorities in England.

My Ministers and I have held meetings with representative groups, including the Local Government Association, and with councils and MPs. Representations from 155 organisations or individuals have been carefully considered before finalising the settlement.

Social care

This Government are dedicated to supporting the most vulnerable, which is why this settlement provides access of up to an additional £1 billion of funding for adult and children’s social care, comprising £300 million in grant and a 3% adult social care precept. In the interests of stability, the Government propos to roll forward allocations of the £1.41 billion 2020-21 social care grant and continue the 2020-21 improved better care fund at £2.1 billion.

Our proposal is to use £240 million of the additional £300 million social care grant as an “equalisation” component, to level the playing field, recognising that the distribution of resources generated through the adult social care precept does not match the pattern of assessed need. The remaining £60 million will be allocated directly through the existing adult social care funding formula.

New homes bonus

Following consultation, the Government are proposing a new round of 2021-22 (year 11) new homes bonus payments. This will be the final set of allocations under the current approach.

The Government are committed to developing a more efficient and effective way of incentivising housing growth, which is why I am pleased to announce that we plan to consult shortly on the future of the new homes bonus.

Lower tier services grant

The Government are proposing a new un-ringfenced lower tier services grant in 2021-22, which will allocate £111 million to local authorities with responsibility for lower tier services.

As part of this, the Government are proposing a minimum funding floor, at a cost of £25 million, so that no authority, either upper or lower tier, will have less funding available in 2021-22 than last year. This minimum funding floor is in response to the current exceptional circumstances and is a one-off.

Minor changes have been made to all allocations proposed at the provisional settlement to take account of changes to new homes bonus allocations arising from updated house completion statistics.

Rural services delivery grant

The Government will be increasing the rural services delivery grant by £4 million, taking the total to £85 million, the highest ever. As in previous years, this grant will be distributed to the top quartile of local authorities on the “super-sparsity” indicator.

Independent living fund

I can confirm that the former independent living fund recipient grant will continue to be paid to local authorities in 2021-22. The total value of the grant will be maintained at the 2020-21 value of £160.6 million, with the same approach to individual local authority allocations. Details will be published shortly.

Council tax

The Government manifesto commits to continuing to protect local taxpayers from excessive council tax increases, and it is for the House of Commons to set an annual threshold at which a council tax referendum is triggered. This is an additional local democratic check and balance to avoid the repeat seen under the last Labour Government when council tax more than doubled.

Next year, local authorities can increase council tax levels by up to 2% without holding a referendum and, where councils have adult social care responsibilities, they will be able to increase by a further 3% specifically for these services. To provide greater flexibility for councils that must take into consideration the situations of their residents when making council tax decisions, this 3% increase for adult social care can be deferred for use in 2022-23.

A referendum principle of up to 2% or £5, whichever is greater, will apply to shire district councils, and £15 on band D for police and crime commissioners. This package of referendum principles strikes a fair balance. The council tax referendum provisions are not a cap, nor do they force councils to set taxes at the threshold level. Councillors, mayors and police and crime commissioners and local councils will rightly want to consider the financial needs of local residents at this challenging point in time, alongside the public’s support for action on keeping our streets safe and providing key services.

Following the Mayor of London’s request, I have decided to place before Parliament a principle for the Greater London Authority which reflects the Mayor’s request for an increase of £15 (on band D) to fund transport concessions above the average level available elsewhere in England. The final decision on the increase in tax will be for the Mayor of London to take. The reasoning is set out in a letter to the Mayor, which I have placed in the Library.

At the same time as providing councils with the flexibility to set increases where they consider it appropriate, the Government also recognise the importance of providing

support to those least able to pay. That is why we are providing councils with £670 million of new funding alongside the settlement, to enable them to continue reducing council tax bills for low-income households. This is in addition to the funding that is already built into the local Government finance system to fund local council tax support, which is a local discount, rather than a benefit payment.

Future of local government finance

As announced earlier in the year, the Government will not proceed with widescale funding reform in 2021-22, including the implementation of the review of relative needs and resources, 75% business rates retention, and a reset of accumulated growth under the business rates retention system.

Our decision to postpone reform has been taken in the interest of creating stability for local authorities and has allowed both the Government and councils to focus on meeting the immediate public health challenges posed by the covid-19 pandemic. We will revisit the priorities for finance reform in time for the next spending review, taking account of wider work on the future, of business rates and how best to organise and finance adult social care.

Covid-19 support

Councils have welcomed our estimated £3 billion package of support to respond to additional expenditure pressures and loss of income from the covid-19 pandemic in 2021-22. This package, on which I will provide further details shortly, includes £1.55 billion of un-ringfenced grant funding; a commitment to meet 75% of councils' irrecoverable losses in council tax and business rates income for 2020-21, worth an estimated £800 million; an extension to the existing sales, fees and charges scheme for three further months, from April to June 2021; and an additional £670 million local council tax support grant.

Conclusion

Depending on local decisions, core spending power in England may rise from £49.0 billion in 2020-21 to up to £51.3 billion in 2021-22, a 4.6% increase in cash terms.

This settlement and the additional covid-19 resources build on the largest year-on-year increase in spending power in a decade last year, and recognise the resources and flexibility councils need to maintain critical services and their role at the heart of the national recovery from covid-19. The settlement provides further stability for the whole sector by maintaining core spending power at pre-pandemic levels, as a minimum for every authority in England. This stands alongside an unprecedented package of covid-19 support this year and next year, totalling over £11 billion in direct support for councils and £30 billion in additional support for local councils, businesses and communities.

[HCWS764]

JUSTICE

National Preventive Mechanism

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Robert Buckland): The United Nations optional protocol to the convention against torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment (OPCAT), which the UK ratified in December 2003, requires states parties

to establish a "national preventive mechanism" (NPM) to carry out visits to places of detention to prevent torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

The Government established the UK NPM in March 2009 (Hansard 31 March 2009, Vol. 490, Part No. 57, Column 56WS). The UK NPM is currently composed of 21 scrutiny bodies covering the whole of the UK.

Following previous practice, I have presented to Parliament the 11th NPM's annual report (Command Paper 366). This report covers the period from 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020.

I again commend the important work that the NPM has carried out over the year and the NPM's independent role in safeguarding the human rights of detainees across the UK and its role in preventing torture and inhuman and degrading treatment. The Government takes allegations of torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment very seriously and any allegations are investigated fully. The Government do not participate in, solicit, encourage or condone the use of torture for any purpose.

The NPM report includes observations in relation to prisons, mental health detention and social care, children in detention, immigration detention and police and court custody. Notably, the report sets out the NPM's response to the covid-19 pandemic. Government action since the beginning of the pandemic has helped to limit the spread of the virus in prisons. With the country now in national lockdown to curb the spread of coronavirus, prisons have introduced tougher measures to help save lives and protect the NHS. These include routinely testing all staff as well as new prisoners so we can better protect our staff and isolate those who test positive even earlier, and rolling out of the vaccine to older prisoners, mirroring the community roll-out and beginning with those aged 80-plus this month, to protect the most vulnerable. This is in addition to the stringent safety measures already in place to protect staff, prisoners and children in custody, which Public Health England endorsed as being effective in limiting the spread of the virus, and ultimately in saving lives.

[HCWS766]

PRIME MINISTER

Ministerial and Other Maternity Allowances Bill

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): The Government have today introduced the Ministerial and other Maternity Allowances Bill in order to make provision for Ministers and Opposition office holders to be able to take maternity leave. I am grateful to Her Majesty's Opposition for its constructive engagement in preparation of the Bill and welcome its support for the measure.

The choice between taking leave to recover from childbirth and care for a new-born child or resigning from office is not acceptable in modern times. The current provision for statutory maternity pay for employees has in contrast been in place since 1987, and some form of maternity grant, even for those who are not employed, has been in place since the National Insurance Act of 1911.

Changes that I made to the ministerial code on becoming Prime Minister set out provision for junior ministers to be able to take maternity leave. However, this work-around relies on another Minister taking on additional responsibilities and cannot be used for Secretary of State or individual offices, such as the Law Officers or the Lord Chancellor.

Until now, the limits on the number of salaries that can be paid overall, and for individual offices has left the Government with limited flexibility to appoint cover should a Minister want to go on maternity leave. In the absence of that flexibility, a senior Minister wishing to go on maternity leave would likely need to resign from the Government.

The Bill creates a designation of “Minister on Leave” which provides for Ministers to take maternity leave. This will also apply to certain Opposition post holders too. Ministers on leave will remain part of the Government

and be able to be briefed on matters and kept in touch with work, but will not be responsible for exercising the functions of the office from which they are on leave.

This is a necessary piece of legislation. However, it does not resolve wider issues such as adoption and parental leave, absences for sickness and other reasons, and unpaid roles. These are complex issues which require careful consideration, taking into account modern working practices and the wider constitutional context. The Government will present a report to Parliament setting out considerations and proposals. I am placing in the Libraries of both Houses a policy document titled “Maternity Leave and other absences by Ministers” which provides further information, including on the practicalities of these arrangements. The Bill and its explanatory notes are being published today.

[HCWS765]

Petition

Thursday 4 February 2021

OBSERVATIONS

TRANSPORT

Impact of the M25 junction 25 improvement scheme

The petition of residents of the constituency of Enfield North,

Declares that the M25 junction 25 improvement scheme proposed by Highways England has been approved and planned works are due to begin in March 2021 but the scheme poses many problems for the local community; further declares that the proposals set out by Highways England overlook the impact of increased traffic flows and speeding along the route which is through residential neighbourhoods and school precincts; notes that the scheme will increase the presence of HGVs which is a safety concern for the three schools along the route and thousands of children who use the route to and from school; further notes that there have been 13 motor accidents involving HGVs on this route since 2015 and two fatal accidents involving HGVs since this scheme was introduced in 2001; and further declares that the proposals set out by Highways England present a serious lack of measures to mitigate air pollution and ensure that the road is safe for residents, school children and other road users.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take into account the concerns of the petitioners and take immediate action to assess thoroughly the impact of the M25 junction 25 improvement scheme on the surrounding neighbourhoods and the environment, and to introduce effective measures to ensure that air pollution is mitigated and the road is safe for residents, school children and other road users.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Feryal Clark, *Official Report*, 26 January 2021; Vol. 688, c. 333.]

[P002645]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Baroness Vere of Norbiton): The Government are committed to working with Highways England to clarify mitigating factors and address the concerns of the hon. Member for Enfield North (Feryal Clark).

Highways England is aware of the hon. Member's concerns about traffic on Bullsmoor Lane. Its modelling shows that there will be no significant impact on traffic levels on this road but expect improved traffic flow. Therefore, we do not expect any negative impact on air quality or road safety.

Highways England will mitigate any impact during construction, by ensuring any site deliveries will be planned to provide immediate access to the site with no queuing on the A10 northbound and will not be routed down Bullsmoor Lane or local roads. Highways England will also continue to work with the relevant local authorities to manage the impact on local roads.

Highways England will keep residents and the local community informed during construction of the scheme.

Ministerial Corrections

Thursday 4 February 2021

WORK AND PENSIONS

Kickstart Scheme

The following is an extract from oral questions on 25 January 2021.

Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): What steps she plans to take to increase the participation of young people in the kickstart scheme as covid-19 lockdown restrictions are eased.

Dr Coffey: Kickstart has got off to a flying start and I am delighted to inform the House that to date 120,000 kickstart jobs have been approved and 2,000 young people have already started. Around 10,000 jobs are available to young people now and I am expecting a further 33,000 or so to be placed fairly soon while we work with employers to finalise the detail of the job offer. We recognise that young people have been greatly impacted by the pandemic, which is why kickstart is such a pivotal part of our plan for jobs to help them secure a stable footing on the career ladder.

[Official Report, 25 January 2021, Vol. 688, c. 8.]

Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the right hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey).

An error has been identified in the response I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Chris Clarkson).

The correct response should have been:

Dr Coffey: Kickstart has got off to a flying start and I am delighted to inform the House that to date **over 110,000** kickstart jobs have been approved and 2,000 young people have already started. Around 10,000 jobs are available to young people now and I am expecting a further 33,000 or so to be placed fairly soon while we work with employers to finalise the detail of the job offer. We recognise that young people have been greatly impacted by the pandemic, which is why kickstart is such a pivotal part of our plan for jobs to help them secure a stable footing on the career ladder.

Topical Questions

The following is an extract from oral questions on 25 January 2021.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

Dr Coffey: Our kickstart scheme is putting the future of young people front and centre of our plan for jobs. I have already shared with the House that over 120,000 kickstart roles have now been approved, and we want to turn those into job starts. In addition to making it simpler for employers by removing the 30-vacancy threshold for direct applications, as was set out earlier, employers who cannot currently access kickstart at all—for example, sole traders with no pay-as-you-earn systems—can now join up through the gateway-plus model that is currently provided by the Federation of Small Businesses and Adecco joint venture. It is an exciting phase as we move up a gear.

[Official Report, 25 January 2021, Vol. 688, c. 16.]

Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the right hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey).

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah).

The correct response should have been:

Dr Coffey: Our kickstart scheme is putting the future of young people front and centre of our plan for jobs. I have already shared with the House that over **110,000** kickstart roles have now been approved, and we want to turn those into job starts. In addition to making it simpler for employers by removing the 30-vacancy threshold for direct applications, as was set out earlier, employers who cannot currently access kickstart at all—for example, sole traders with no pay-as-you-earn systems—can now join up through the gateway-plus model that is currently provided by the Federation of Small Businesses and Adecco joint venture. It is an exciting phase as we move up a gear.

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**not later than
Thursday 11 February 2021**

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