

**Wednesday
10 February 2021**

**Volume 689
No. 175**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Wednesday 10 February 2021

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

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

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

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: I remind colleagues that a deferred Division will take place today in the Members' Library between 11.30 am and 2 pm. If a Member has a proxy vote in operation, they must not vote in person in the deferred Division. Their nominated proxy should vote on their behalf. I remind colleagues of the importance of social distancing during deferred Divisions.

Oral Answers to Questions

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

The Minister for Women and Equalities was asked—

Policy Evidence

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): What steps she is taking to ensure that her policies are informed by robust evidence. [912134]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Elizabeth Truss): We must have an equality agenda that is driven by the evidence. That is why we have launched an equality data programme, looking at the life paths of individuals across the country and ensuring that we have hard data about the barriers that people face, whether in education, employment or accessing capital for business.

Aaron Bell [V]: I thank the Minister for her answer. Like her, I welcome the importance of data in all this. I also welcome the fact that last year the Government Equalities Office commissioned the Behavioural Insights Team to produce a summary of the evidence on unconscious bias training. As she will know, the report highlighted that there was no evidence that this training changed behaviour in the long term, nor did it improve workplace equality. It also stated that there is emerging evidence of unintended negative consequences. So I am glad that the Government are phasing it out in the civil service and that this House is doing the same, but can she assure me and the House that any suggested replacement for this training must be supported by the evidence of what works?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is right that unconscious bias training has been shown not to work and in fact can be counterproductive. The best way to improve equality is to make the system fairer by increasing choice and openness. For example, making systems around pay and promotion more transparent and open has been shown by the evidence to improve equality for everybody.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con) [V]: I was very pleased to hear my right hon. Friend's commitment to robust evidence. Does she agree that there is hard data that, when there is enforcement of reporting, more companies publish their gender pay gap? With no enforcement in place, so far this year, just one third of last year's total has reported. Is that robust enough evidence for her that without enforcement there is a danger that equal pay will slide backwards?

Elizabeth Truss: I am pleased to say that we saw the gender pay gap fall to a record low last year, but we need to continue making progress on that issue, which includes making sure that we are tackling the cause of the gender pay gap, and 35% of the cause is the fact that women and men are in different occupations. So we need to make it easier for women to get into high-paid jobs in areas such as technology, science, and engineering.

Covid-19: Support for Women

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): What recent assessment she has made of the adequacy of Government support for women during the covid-19 outbreak. [912135]

The Minister for Equalities (Kemi Badenoch): We have rolled out unprecedented levels of economic support to those who need it most, regardless of gender. That includes sectors that employ large numbers of women, such as retail and hospitality. The Government are continually reviewing the effectiveness of their support and Departments carefully consider the impact of their decisions on those sharing protected characteristics. That is in line with both their legal obligations, and the Government's strong commitment to promoting fairness. Of course, men are impacted too. Indeed, the latest figures show a higher redundancy rate for men. That is why we are committed to ensuring a fair recovery for all.

Richard Thomson [V]: A recent High Court ruling found the universal credit childcare payment system to be unlawful and discriminatory against women, after a single mother was forced to pay childcare costs upfront and then claim back, forcing her into debt and causing psychological harm. Does the Minister agree that the universal credit childcare offer is inadequate for parents who rely on it, 80% of whom are women? Will she urge the Department of Work and Pensions to improve it?

Kemi Badenoch: I will speak to my colleagues in the DWP, but I know that the Government have been offering unprecedented levels of support to provide for all those people who require support in childcare. That includes the recent £20 uplift, which the Chancellor agreed to last year.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab) [V]: A recent TUC survey found that 71% of mothers asking to be furloughed as they could not juggle work with childcare have been refused by their employers. What steps will the Minister take to ensure that affordable childcare is available for all parents who need it, so that they are not forced out of work by this pandemic?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. The Government have provided significant support for those people who have been furloughed, and there is a childcare provision within universal credit. We recognise that parents across the country are having difficulties during the pandemic, and we have put several measures in place to ensure they have the support required.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP) [V]: The pandemic has made flexible working a necessity for many women, who have a disproportionate share of caring responsibilities, but under the Flexible Working Regulations 2014 an employee is eligible to request flexible working arrangements only after 26 consecutive weeks of work for their employer. What consideration has the Minister given to the recommendation in the new Women and Equalities Committee report to remove that 26-week threshold?

Kemi Badenoch: We have a manifesto commitment to further encourage flexible working, and we are going to be consulting on making it the default unless employers have good reasons not to. We know that the Women and Equalities Committee has released a report, and we are carefully considering it and will provide our conclusions in due course. We appreciate the work of the Committee on these important issues and the contributions of those who gave evidence.

Children: Equality of Opportunity

Rob Roberts (Delyn) (Con): What steps she is taking to ensure that children throughout the UK have equality of opportunity. [912137]

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): What steps she is taking to ensure that children throughout the UK have equality of opportunity. [912141]

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): What steps she is taking to ensure that children throughout the UK have equality of opportunity. [912142]

The Minister for Equalities (Kemi Badenoch): Spreading opportunity is a top priority across Government. That is why we are levelling up school standards and investing over £7.1 billion more in schools by 2022-23 than in 2019-20. We are committed to providing extra support for the education of disadvantaged children during the pandemic, including through our £350 million national tutoring programme.

Rob Roberts [V]: In Wales, there has been a reduction in real-terms education spending in the last 10 years of 8.4%. I appreciate that education is devolved, but the children of Delyn are also children of the United Kingdom. As my hon. Friend's brief effectively spans all Government

Departments from an equalities standpoint, what can she do to ensure that children in Wales are not forgotten by the UK Government?

Kemi Badenoch: My hon. Friend is correct that education is a devolved matter in Wales. However, it is important that we work closely together to ensure that every child receives the best education, wherever they live in the UK, and to give them the best start in life. For example, our UK-wide safeguarding policy is essential to allow children to concentrate on their learning without fear of negative influence. Our equality data programme will seek to use data from across the UK to help inform future policy, making equality of opportunity a reality for all.

Laura Trott [V]: I thank the Minister for her reply and the initiatives contained within it. We know school closures have had a very unequal impact on children. Does she agree that the best way to address that is to safely reopen schools as quickly as possible?

Kemi Badenoch: We are committed to getting all pupils and students back into schools and colleges as soon as the public health picture allows. In doing so, the Government will be guided by the scientific and medical experts. When Parliament returns from recess in the week commencing 22 February, we intend to publish our plan for taking the country out of lockdown, including plans for reopening education. We hope we will be able to commence the full reopening of schools from Monday 8 March. We have committed to providing schools, parents and young people with a minimum of two weeks' notice for that return to on-site provision.

Henry Smith [V]: What support for children with learning disabilities are the Government pursuing to ensure equality of opportunity?

Kemi Badenoch: The pandemic has been extremely challenging for many families with children and young people with special educational needs. Supporting them is a priority for this Government, and their wellbeing remains central to our response. My hon. Friend will be glad to know that we are providing £40.8 million this year for the Family Fund to help more than 80,000 low-income families who have children with disabilities or serious illnesses. That includes £13.5 million specifically in response to the coronavirus pandemic, which may include assistive technology to aid remote learning.

Social Mobility

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): What steps the Government is taking to increase social mobility. [912138]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Elizabeth Truss): Our focus is on levelling up and ensuring that no one is left behind. During the pandemic, we are ensuring that all children get the chance to succeed through a further £300 million to schools for tutoring, new summer school initiatives and the covid premium.

David Johnston: Last month, it was reported that the civil service fast stream is no longer publishing data on the social backgrounds of the people it hires, which came with information obtained by a freedom of information

request showing that the success of those from private schools entering the fast stream is double that of those from comprehensive schools. Can I therefore ask my right hon. Friend to push the civil service fast stream to publish that data regularly, so that it leads by example and demonstrates its commitment to social mobility?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is correct to say that the civil service should be recruiting the best people, regardless of their background, and that it should be open to all. We will be publishing the data that he asks for by April of this year, and the Government will have more to say shortly on widening opportunity in the civil service.

Geographic Inequality of Opportunity

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): What steps she is taking to tackle geographic inequality of opportunity. [912139]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Elizabeth Truss): We need to tackle the scourge of geographic inequality—average hourly wages are nearly 30% higher in London than they are in the north-west—and that is why I have asked the Equality Hub to look beyond protected characteristics and identify additional barriers that people face up and down the country.

Mark Menzies [V]: Coastal communities such as Lytham St Annes are home to substantial tourism and hospitality sectors. Those sectors have traditionally employed large numbers of women, but they have been particularly hit by the pandemic. Given that inequality in coastal resorts is a long-recognised issue, what plans does my right hon. Friend have to ensure that coastal towns—in Lancashire, especially—can build back better?

Elizabeth Truss: We are directing vital support to seaside towns through the £230 million coastal communities fund. We recognise the unique challenges faced by towns such as Lytham St Annes, and that will be very much in our thoughts as we look to the £4 billion levelling-up fund and the UK shared prosperity fund. I am pleased to say that we will be publishing prospectuses for those shortly, and no doubt my hon. Friend will be interested in applying.

BAME People in Criminal Justice System

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with the Justice Secretary on the disproportionate number of BAME people in the criminal justice system. [912143]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Lucy Frazer): Tackling race disparity in the criminal justice system remains a priority for all Ministers in my Department. We have a broad programme of work to address the issue, including work on the collection of data and the implementation of policies that tackle disproportionality, together with scrutiny and oversight. The criminal justice system race and ethnicity board reviews the progress of this work.

Janet Daby [V]: A lack of diversity in the judiciary is something that should concern the Government. It is deeply troubling, as it is one of the major reasons that

all communities, including black, Asian and minority ethnic communities, lack confidence in the criminal justice system. There are currently zero Supreme Court judges who are from black, Asian or minority ethnic backgrounds. Steps need to be taken to fix the justice system so that it is fair and equal for everyone. Will the Government introduce a clear target for a representative judiciary, as called for in the Lammy review?

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Member raises an important issue in relation to diversity in the judiciary, and it is important to ensure that women and black and ethnic minorities come through the system as lawyers. Indeed, there are a lot of women coming through the system, but we need to improve that as well. From 2014 to 2019, there have been some small improvements in judicial diversity. The proportion of women judges increased from 24% to 32% in the courts and from 43% to 46% in tribunals, and the proportion of BAME judges increased from 6% to 7% in the courts and from 9% to 11% in tribunals, but we need to do more work. The judiciary is independent, and I know that it is very concerned about this issue.

Discrimination Against LGBTQ+ Community

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to tackle discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community. [912144]

The Minister for Equalities (Kemi Badenoch): Any discrimination against LGBT people is unacceptable, and the Government are committed to supporting LGBT people and improving the lives of all citizens. We are working across agencies to ensure that they are safe from violence and discrimination. Internationally, we have awarded £3.2 million of new funding to help Commonwealth Governments and civil society to repeal outdated discriminatory laws.

Andrew Bowie [V]: Recent findings show an alarming rise in homophobic hate crimes across the United Kingdom, from 6,655 in 2014-15 to an astonishing 18,000 last year. These figures show that, despite our best efforts, many people are continuing to suffer discrimination and abuse, so does my hon. Friend agree that much more must be done? What more will her Department do to ensure that the United Kingdom can really become a country where facing discrimination on the basis of who you love really is a thing of the past?

Kemi Badenoch: I agree with my hon. Friend, and I encourage those who may have been the victim of hate crime to speak out and contact the police. This Government are proud to have supported Galop, the country's leading LGBT anti-violence charity, and we welcome its new specialist hate crime helpline, which launched last week. To further ensure the safety of LGBT people in this country and around the world, the Government are committed to ending conversion therapy and delivering an international conference.

Taxation: People with Disabilities

Lia Nici (Great Grimsby) (Con): What recent discussions she has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on ensuring that the taxation system does not discriminate against people with disabilities. [912145]

The Minister for Equalities (Kemi Badenoch): The Government recognise it is important that the tax system treats people fairly and consistently, while also raising revenue for public services. We provide tax-free welfare benefits for those who have extra costs associated with their disability, including disability living allowance, personal independence payment and attendance allowance. We have also made available several VAT zero rates for the purchase of certain equipment and appliances designed solely for use by a disabled person, such as the VAT zero rate for the leasing of vehicles through the Motability scheme.

Lia Nici [V]: I am grateful for the Minister's reply. I have been contacted by a constituent who is visually impaired and needs expensive corrective glasses annually, on which she has to pay VAT. Does the Minister agree that it is not fair that the greater a person's sight disability, the greater the tax they pay? Will she agree to discuss with the Treasury that, as glasses are an essential item for my constituent, they should not be taxed as a luxury?

Kemi Badenoch: My hon. Friend raises an important point. The Government ensure that the supply of health and welfare services, including opticians and eye tests, is exempt from VAT, which ensures that VAT is not a barrier to accessing medical treatment. Moreover, in addition to NHS complex lens vouchers, the Government already offer support for individuals to help with the cost of glasses through NHS optical vouchers. Those eligible for help include children and those on certain income-related benefits, and the value varies from £39 to £215 depending on the level of the patient's prescription. However, I will write to my hon. Friend with full details so that she can assist her constituent.

Reducing Poverty

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on reducing poverty. [912146]

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on reducing poverty. [912160]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Will Quince): My colleagues and I at the DWP have frequent discussions with GEO Ministers on a wide range of issues. Throughout this pandemic the Government have sought to protect jobs and incomes, spending billions on strengthening welfare support for those most in need. Our long-term ambition is to level up across the United Kingdom, helping people back into work as quickly as possible, based on clear evidence of the importance of work in tackling poverty.

Andrew Gwynne [V]: Child poverty is a stain on our nation, and hon. Members on both sides of the House should commit to working together to eradicate it. The Minister will know that, before the pandemic, child poverty was projected to increase to 5.2 million by 2022, a disastrous thing for those children and something that will significantly damage life opportunities. What steps is he taking now to do everything possible to ensure this prediction does not come true?

Will Quince: As far as I am concerned, one child in poverty is one child too many. All the evidence suggests that work is the best route out of poverty for families, and that is why we are supporting parents into work with our £30 billion plan for jobs and childcare offer. We recognise that times are tough for so many at the moment, which is why we have boosted our welfare system by over £7 billion this year to support those facing the most financial disruption.

Jessica Morden: May I draw the Minister's attention to research by the Welsh gender equality charity Chwarae Teg that shows that women are twice as likely to be key workers in Wales, and that the effects of sector shut-downs, business closures and unemployment are falling disproportionately on women, who are more likely to lose their job in the pandemic? Will the Minister study the report and tell the House what practical steps the Government are taking to help them?

Will Quince: The female employment rate is at 72% and the female unemployment rate is at 4.7%. This is an issue we take incredibly seriously, not least the Minister for Employment, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Mims Davies), who leads on this important work. I will, of course, study the report carefully, as will the Minister for Employment.

Topical Questions

[912114] **Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab):** If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Elizabeth Truss): Tomorrow is the International Day of Women and Girls in Science and, as we build back better, we want to see a new generation of female tech and science entrepreneurs. Promoting science, technology, engineering and maths among girls is vital to this. Since 2010, 31% more girls and 34% more women are studying these subjects at A-level and university respectively. We are building on that programme with STEM ambassadors to encourage even more girls and women to come forward.

Kerry McCarthy [V]: Many disabled people, and their carers too, are still in receipt of legacy benefits, which means they are not getting the £20 uplift that universal credit claimants have been getting. Does the Minister agree that that is discriminatory and needs to be addressed?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Will Quince): I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I appreciate that many people are facing financial disruption due to the pandemic, which is why the Government have put an unprecedented package of support in place. Legacy benefits were increased by 1.7% last year and will increase by 0.5% from April, in line with prices.

[912115] **Ruth Edwards (Rushcliffe) (Con) [V]:** I thank the safeguarding Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), for all her hard work to combat violence against women and girls. Will she join me in encouraging everybody who has experienced violence, or supported those who have, to submit their views to the Government's consultation on the next violence against women and girls strategy, which closes next week, on 19 February?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins) [V]: I thank my hon. Friend for promoting the Government's call for evidence on tackling violence against women and girls. We are asking the public, victims, charities, employers, health professionals, universities, colleges, the armed forces, the NHS and many more for their views, so that we can develop a national strategy that is fit for the 2020s. This is the largest ever call for evidence on crimes that disproportionately affect women and girls, because we want to hear from all parts of society. I ask all hon. Members to play their part and encourage their constituents to contribute to this vital call for evidence before it closes on 19 February.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab) [V]: South Asians, particularly Bangladeshi and Pakistani people, are still experiencing three times the risk from coronavirus in this second wave, so take-up of the vaccine is vital. We know that historical issues of mistrust and culturally inappropriate public health information have contributed to the legitimate vaccine hesitancy. The Government have had time to plan to mitigate all this, but they have still not produced a clear strategy to engage with our black, Asian and ethnic minority communities. What steps has the Minister taken to ensure that the vaccine roll-out reaches all our communities, particularly those who are unequally impacted?

The Minister for Equalities (Kemi Badenoch): I will be providing a second covid disparities report at the end of this month, which will provide more comprehensive detail of steps we have taken. However, this is an issue that we recognise is very serious. The disparities are changing for different groups; we have seen some progress, for instance, among black groups. However, we do emphasise that vaccines are the best way to protect people from coronavirus. The Department of Health and Social Care and the NHS are working closely with black, Asian and minority ethnic communities to support those receiving a vaccine and to help anyone who may have questions about the process. As part of that, we are working with faith and community leaders to give them advice and information about the universal benefits of vaccination and how their communities can get a vaccine.

Marsha De Cordova: The Government have failed to consider the impact on equalities resulting from their responses to the pandemic. Covid mortality rates are twice as high in deprived areas, and the lowest-paid are more than twice as likely to have lost their jobs. That is why the Government have a legal duty, as set out in the Equality Act 2010, to consider the effects of policies on inequality, whether Ministers agree or not. As the Minister for Women and Equalities has yet to reply to my letter dated 14 January, can she now say that she will work to ensure that all Departments undertake and publish equality impact assessments on all their responses to this pandemic?

Kemi Badenoch: I completely reject the hon. Lady's assertions. We do have a strategy, one part of which is to ensure that ethnic minorities are not stigmatised. The issues around coronavirus are complex. We have released information in various reports showing what the risk factors are and we have also outlined a plan to address them.

[912118] **Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con) [V]:** There is growing concern that an increasing number of women are becoming victims of online gambling addiction, with the resulting financial and mental health issues. What steps are the Government taking to truly understand the scale of the problem and safeguard women from predatory recruitment tactics?

Kemi Badenoch: Rates of problem gambling among women remain very low, but we know how devastating its impacts can be. The Gambling Commission is looking at how it collects data on gambling participation and problem gambling to make sure that we have access to even more robust and regular data on the issue. The Government are also reviewing the Gambling Act 2005 to make sure that we have the right protections in place to make gambling safer for all.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

[912099] **Gary Sambrook (Birmingham, Northfield) (Con):** If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 10 February.

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Gary Sambrook: Over the past week, thousands of people across Frankley Great Park and south Northfield have done what has been asked of them and gone and got a test, because of a small number of South African variant cases in the constituency. Will the Prime Minister join me in thanking Dr Justin Varney, Councillor Simon Morrall and Birmingham City Council for everything they have done to scale up mass testing across Frankley Great Park? Will he encourage anyone who has not had a test so far to get one at one of the designated sites?

The Prime Minister: Yes, indeed. I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue and, indeed, join him in thanking the NHS staff who are scaling up the surge testing in the way that he describes. I encourage everybody in the area and, indeed, throughout the country to get a vaccine when they are asked to do so.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): May I begin by thanking everybody involved in the vaccine roll-out? We have now vaccinated 12.6 million people and are on course to vaccinate the first four priority groups by the end of this week. That is a truly amazing achievement.

Can the Prime Minister confirm today that the Government will extend business rates relief beyond 31 March?

The Prime Minister: I am glad to hear the right hon. and learned Gentleman join in the praise of the vaccine roll-out, which is indeed a tribute to NHS staff, the Army, the volunteers and many, many others.

On the right hon. and learned Gentleman's point about the extension of business rates relief, he knows that this Government are committed to supporting

businesses, people and livelihoods throughout the pandemic. That is what we will continue to do, but he should wait until the Budget for the Chancellor to explain exactly what we are going to do.

Keir Starmer: I think that answer was that the Prime Minister cannot give an answer yet, but hundreds of thousands of businesses are affected by this. The trouble is that businesses do not work as slowly as the Prime Minister—they need an answer now. As the British Chambers of Commerce says, businesses “simply can’t wait until the March Budget.”

Let me try another vitally important question for businesses and for millions of working people. Can the Prime Minister confirm today that the furlough scheme will be extended beyond April?

The Prime Minister: I think most people in this country are aware that we are going through a very serious pandemic in which rates of infection have been steadily brought down thanks to the efforts of the British people. I also think that Members of this House are familiar with the notion that in just a few days we will be setting out a road map for the way out of this pandemic—a road map that I hope the right hon. and learned Gentleman and his colleagues will support, although their support, as we know, tends to be a transitory thing: one week we have it, the next week we do not. He will not have to contain himself for very long.

Keir Starmer: Let me let the Prime Minister into a secret: he can take decisions for himself and he does not need to leave everything to the 11th minute. If I were Prime Minister, I would say to businesses, “We will support you now. We will protect jobs now.” The CBI, the Federation of Small Businesses, the Institute of Directors and the British Chambers of Commerce have all said the same thing: they all say that they cannot wait until the Budget. The Prime Minister may disagree with me, but he is actually disagreeing with businesses. Why does the Prime Minister think he knows better than British business?

The Prime Minister: Most business people I have talked to—I have talked to a great many in the past 12 months—would agree that no Government around the world have done more to support business, wrapping our arms around it. I am delighted to hear this enthusiasm for business from the Labour party, which at the last election stood on a manifesto to destroy capitalism and, indeed, to dismantle the very pharmaceutical industry that has provided the vaccines on which we now rely. Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman now repudiate that policy?

Keir Starmer: We all know what the Prime Minister once said that he wanted to do to business. We on these Benches would rather listen to businesses.

We have no decision on business rates, no decision on furlough. Let us try another crucial issue. This time there is no excuse for delaying, because this has to be decided before the March Budget and the Prime Minister does not need to check with the Chancellor—will he now commit to extending the evictions ban on residential properties beyond 21 February?

The Prime Minister: I have said repeatedly that what we will do in this Government and throughout this pandemic is put our arms around the British people,

support them throughout the pandemic and make sure that they are not unfairly evicted during the pandemic. That is what we will do. What I very much hope that we hear from the right hon. and learned Gentleman is that he has had not only a Damascene conversion to the importance of business, but a Damascene conversion to supporting all the Government’s policies that support business, rather than sniping from the sidelines. Why does he not get behind us and back the Government, back us in our efforts to back business and back the British people?

Keir Starmer: I am not going to take lectures from a man who not only wrote two versions of every column he ever wrote as a journalist, but proposed Donald Trump for a Nobel peace prize and gave Dominic Cummings a pay rise.

Let us go back to the question. Another area where the Prime Minister has repeatedly delayed and now changes his policy pretty well every day is securing our borders against variants of covid. Every week, the Prime Minister comes here and says, “We have one of the toughest regimes in the world”. We know that his Home Secretary disagrees with him. We know that the Health Secretary disagrees with him. Luckily, Oxford University keeps track of how tough border restrictions are in every country. It says that there are at least 33 countries around the world that currently have tougher restrictions than the United Kingdom—33, Prime Minister—including Canada, Denmark, Japan, Israel and many others. In fact, Oxford University says that we are not even in the top bracket of countries for border restrictions. It is 50 days after we first discovered the South African variant—50 days. How does the Prime Minister explain that?

The Prime Minister: There are some countries in Europe that do not even have a hotel quarantine scheme such as the one that we are putting in on Monday. We have among the toughest border regimes anywhere in the world. People should understand that, on a normal day at this time of year, we could expect about 250,000 people to be arriving in this country. We have got it down to about 20,000, 5,000 of whom are involved in bringing vital things into this country, such as medicines and food, as we discussed last week and which the right hon. and learned Gentleman agreed was a good idea. Unless he actually wants to cut this country off from the rest of the world, which, last week, I think he said that he did not want to do—unless of course he has changed his mind again—I think that this policy is measured, it is proportionate, and it is getting tougher from Monday. I hope that he supports it.

Keir Starmer: The truth is this: the Prime Minister is failing to give security to British businesses and he is failing to secure our borders. The Prime Minister often complains that we never put forward constructive proposals, so here are two for him: support businesses and protect jobs now by extending furlough, business rates relief and VAT cuts for hospitality; and, secondly, secure our borders with a comprehensive hotel quarantine on arrival. No more delays: will he do it?

The Prime Minister: We have just announced the quarantine policy, which, as I have said to the House, is among the toughest in the world and certainly tougher than those in most other European countries. I am

delighted that the right hon. and learned Gentleman is now supporting business—not a policy for which he was famous before—in his latest stunt of bandwagoneering. He has moved from one side of the debate to the other throughout this crisis. Some people have said that this is a “good crisis”. Some people have said that this crisis is “a gift that keeps on giving”.

Those people sit on the Labour Front Bench. It is disgraceful that they should say those things. This is one of the biggest challenges that this country has faced since the second world war and, thanks to one of the fastest vaccine roll-outs anywhere in the world, it is a challenge that this country can meet and is meeting. I believe that this vaccine roll-out programme is something that this House and this country should be very proud of.

[912100] **Julian Smith** (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for the decisions he took last year that have meant that the vaccine programme is in such a good position this week. Despite that success, it is vital that the programme keeps pace with the changing variants. Will he update the House on where the UK stands on ensuring that the UK supply chain is in place and that we do not get behind as the virus mutates?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend asks an extremely important question. We recently announced an agreement for 50 million doses with the manufacturer CureVac because we believe that that may help us to develop vaccines that can respond at scale to new variants of the virus. As the House will have heard from the chief medical officer, the deputy chief medical officer and others, I think we are going to have to get used to the idea of vaccinating and then revaccinating in the autumn as we come to face these new variants.

Mr Speaker: Let us head up to Ross, Skye and Lochaber with the Scottish National party’s Westminster leader, Ian Blackford.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP) [V]: New research from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the baby bank charity Little Village has revealed that 1.3 million children under five in the United Kingdom are living in poverty. That is a truly shocking figure that should make this Tory Government utterly ashamed. The Scottish National party has repeatedly called for a financial package to boost household incomes and reverse this Tory child poverty crisis. The Prime Minister has the power to tackle child poverty right now by making the £20 uplift to universal credit permanent and extending it to legacy benefits. The Tory Government have been stalling on this for months. Will the Prime Minister finally act, or will he leave millions of children out in the cold?

The Prime Minister: The whole House and this country should be proud of the way in which we have tried to look after people—the poorest and neediest families throughout the country—not just with universal credit, which the Opposition would actually abolish, but by helping vulnerable people with their food and heating bills through the £170 million winter grant scheme, and looking after people with the free school meal vouchers. As I have said before, we will put our arms around the people of the entire country throughout the pandemic.

Ian Blackford: I have to say that that was pathetic—that was no answer. We are talking about 1.3 million children under five in poverty. Let me quote:

“She cried on her doorstep because I gave her nappies, wipes and winter clothes for her child. I went away with a lump in my throat.”

Those are the words of Emilie, a baby bank worker who is supporting families that the Tories have pushed into poverty through a decade of cuts. They do not need more empty words from a Prime Minister who simply does not care enough to act.

This morning, a new report from Citizens Advice Scotland warned that Tory cuts could reduce the value of universal credit by as much as a quarter, just when people need that money the most. Will the Prime Minister agree to meet me and other Opposition parties ahead of the Budget for an urgent summit on tackling child poverty, or will he be yet another Tory Prime Minister who leaves a generation of children languishing in poverty?

The Prime Minister: I must say that I reject entirely what the right hon. Gentleman has just said. I do not believe that any Government could have done more to help the people of this country throughout this pandemic, and we will continue to do so. Yes, of course we bitterly lament and reject the poverty that some families unquestionably suffer. It is tragic that too many families have had a very tough time during the pandemic, but we will continue to support them in all the ways that we have set out. I may say to the right hon. Gentleman that there is a profound philosophical difference between him and me; the Scottish nationalist party is morphing into an ever more left-wing party that believes—

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Hear, hear!

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Hear, hear!

The Prime Minister: There you go, Mr Speaker. They believe fundamentally that it is the duty of the taxpayer to pay for more and more and more. We want to get people into jobs, and it is in that respect that the Scottish nationalist party is, I am afraid, failing—

Mr Speaker: Order. Prime Minister, we both know that you are only teasing and trying to wind up the leader of the SNP; please, let’s drop it. Let us move on, because Lee Anderson is waiting for you.

[912101] **Lee Anderson** (Ashfield) (Con) [V]: A new freeport for the east midlands will create over 60,000 new jobs and provide a massive boost for employers such as Caunton Engineering and Abacus in Ashfield. After decades of neglect from Labour MPs, we now feel an sense of hope in the red wall seats. My mum and dad voted Conservative for the first time at the last general election and were touched when the Prime Minister acknowledged that their votes were lent. Could my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister please reassure my mum and dad, my friends, my family and all my constituents that our area will never be let down again?

The Prime Minister: Absolutely. I thank my hon. Friend for everything he is doing for Ashfield. He and I have had enjoyable times campaigning for the people of Ashfield and will continue to do so. I can tell Paul and Jenny that our commitment to levelling up is absolutely rock solid throughout this country.

Mr Speaker: Let us head to Meirionnydd with Liz Saville Roberts.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC) [V]: Diolch yn fawr iawn, Llefarydd.

As we just heard, the Government claim to have a levelling-up agenda underpinned by a research and development road map. The trouble is that the Tories' track record on this is not good: in fact, it is abysmal. Wales receives the lowest R&D spend per person of the four nations, at around 40% of spend per head in England, and Westminster's obsession with the golden triangle of Oxford, Cambridge and London shows no sign of abating. Will the Prime Minister now commit to a further devolved R&D funding settlement to the Senedd, or is he content for Westminster's road map to be Wales's road to nowhere?

The Prime Minister: I am afraid that I think that the right hon. Lady is doing Wales down, the people of Wales down and the ingenuity of Wales down, because I think about a quarter of the airline passengers in the world are borne aloft on wings made by the Welsh aerospace sector. Bridgend is going to be one of the great centres of battery manufacturing in this country, if not the world. Wales is at the cutting edge of technology under this Government's plans for record spending on R&D—£22 billion by the end of this Parliament—and Wales, along with the whole of the rest of the UK, will benefit massively.

[912106] **Dr Kieran Mullan** (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con) [V]: The UK has fallen behind Europe in tapping the potential of geothermal heat and energy in places like Crewe. Will the Prime Minister meet me to discuss how we can ensure that geothermal helps us to build back better with a revitalised package of incentives for industry?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for the excellent point he makes about Crewe and the way it is now in the forefront of deep geothermal energy exploration. I am very happy to meet him to discuss what we can do to further geothermal energy in Crewe, diary permitting.

[912102] **Yasmin Qureshi** (Bolton South East) (Lab) [V]: This Government said that no council would be suffering as a result of the pandemic, and the Chancellor said that he would do everything—"whatever it takes"—to help them. Yet Tory-controlled Bolton Council has just announced £35 million of cuts in towns and an increase in the council tax budget of 3.8%. Can the Prime Minister assure my constituents and my town that that money will be given to them, or will this join a long list of Tory failed promises?

The Prime Minister: I want to congratulate the great Conservative-controlled council of Bolton on everything that it is doing and continuing to do throughout this pandemic to look after the people of Bolton. I know what incredible work the local officials do, and I thank them very much for it. Since we believe so strongly in local government, as a creature of local government myself, I am proud that we have invested £4.6 billion in supporting local government just so far in this pandemic.

[912108] **Sajid Javid** (Bromsgrove) (Con): From rainforests to coral reefs, the world's ecosystems are at risk of catastrophic decline. That was the conclusion last week of the Dasgupta review, which my right hon. Friend

rightly welcomed. This threat to our biodiversity is not just a moral failure; it is economically short-sighted too. When I asked Professor Dasgupta to carry out this work, he told me that it would not be complete until after the UK had hosted the COP26 summit. But now, given that the summit has been delayed until later this year and that it will take place alongside our presidency of the G7, does my right hon. Friend agree that the UK has been presented with a unique opportunity to show global leadership on how we can better protect our most precious asset—nature?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I thank him for what he is doing in this area. I want the House to know that we want the UN COP26 summit to be a landmark event, not just for tackling climate change but for biodiversity. I think it is high time that the leaders of the world took a step to reverse the loss of habitats and species that we have seen over the last century.

[912103] **Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD) [V]: It is estimated that up to 400,000 people are living with the debilitating effects of long covid, and some of them are NHS heroes, who caught covid in that first wave. Nearly a year later, I have heard from a doctor who says she wonders whether she will ever be able to walk unaided again, let alone manage a full day of work. Does the Prime Minister recognise that, for this group, long covid is an occupational disease, and will he set up a compensation scheme similar to what we offer our armed forces, so that we ensure that those who have lost their livelihoods by saving lives are fully supported?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady, because she is right to highlight the incredible sacrifice and effort of NHS staff, many of whom, sadly, have contracted covid in the course of their duties, and a great many of them have sadly continued to be affected by that disease. We must study the long-term effects of covid and ensure that we continue to look after our wonderful NHS staff throughout their careers.

[912109] **Julian Sturdy** (York Outer) (Con) [V]: Can the Prime Minister confirm today that all students will be back in school no later than 8 March, and will he commit to starting any phased return straight after half term, so that the damaging effects of being away from school are not drawn out for any longer than is absolutely necessary?

The Prime Minister: I can certainly confirm that we will do everything we can, and I know that the settled will of most people in this House is to get our schoolchildren back on 8 March, if we possibly can. I will be setting out for my hon. Friend as much as we can say on Monday, and then in the week of 22 February, we will be setting out a road map and the way forward for schools. We have to make sure that we keep this virus under control. It is coming down, but we cannot take our foot off its throat.

[912104] **Ian Mearns** (Gateshead) (Lab) [V]: Having sat on the High Speed Rail (London – West Midlands) Bill Committee for 15 months, I was a sceptic as to the economic benefits of the project for the north-east, but HS2 is going ahead, at least in the south. It is therefore

crucial that the eastern leg of HS2 goes ahead, not just for Yorkshire and the east midlands, but for the north-east. The Prime Minister has made repeated promises to the people of the north-east of his intention to level up and to connect and create opportunities for people here, in places like Gateshead. As we strive to recover from the damage done to so many families and businesses by the pandemic, will the Prime Minister commit to beginning the work on the eastern leg of HS2, starting in the north-east and to run simultaneously with the construction in the south, so that our region is not forced to wait another couple of decades for 21st-century rail connectivity?

The Prime Minister: I can certainly confirm that we are going to develop the eastern leg as well as the whole of the HS2. The hon. Gentleman will be hearing a lot more about what we are going to do with our national infrastructure revolution and about what we will do to improve not just rail transport, but road transport in the north-east.

Q19. [912111] **Caroline Ansell** (Eastbourne) (Con) [V]: There is no shortage of commitment or compassion in my town of Eastbourne for homeless people, who are vulnerable and need complex support. However, neighbouring Brighton continues to send its homeless to our town, and we do not have the resources to meet this need. Three homeless people have died, and I believe that there will be inquests. Brighton is not engaging with Eastbourne Borough Council in any meaningful way, and a further 51 placements have been made in recent weeks. Will my right hon. Friend join me in urging Brighton and Hove City Council leaders to engage on this as a matter of urgency?

The Prime Minister: Yes, indeed. I thank Brighton and Hove City Council for co-operating with Eastbourne Borough Council in getting this done. There must be co-operation. No one in this country should be sleeping rough or homeless as a result of this pandemic or, indeed, through any other cause. We have invested £700 million this year to help people off the streets, and it continues to be a national priority. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government for what he is doing and the various taskforces that are currently at work to prevent people from coming out on the streets again as we lift the restrictions.

[912105] **Geraint Davies** (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: At the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency in Swansea, there have been 526 cases of coronavirus since last September. The Prime Minister told us at Prime Minister's Question Time:

"All staff who can work from home are doing so"—[*Official Report*, 28 January 2021; Vol. 688, c. 374.]

But in March last year, 250 people were working on site, and now the numbers are in their thousands, and they are facing a more infectious and widespread disease. Yesterday, 90 people were sent home following the latest outbreak of coronavirus just before the weekend. Given that BT is on standby to install home secure technology to allow homeworking, will the Prime Minister meet me and the Public and Commercial Services Union ahead of the strike ballot next week, so that workplace numbers can be reduced until the vaccine is rolled out, to keep people safe and avoid an unnecessary strike?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this with me again. Thanks to the working from home strategy that the DVLA has been pursuing, of a workforce of 6,000, there are currently thankfully only nine cases of covid to the best of my knowledge, and three of those individuals are working from home. We are rolling out lateral flow tests; a huge number of lateral flow tests are being distributed to the DVLA. The long-term solution—or the medium-term solution, I should say—is to vaccinate and to roll out the vaccination programme. That is what this Government are doing in Wales and across the country.

[912112] **Nicola Richards** (West Bromwich East) (Con) [V]: Families across West Bromwich East who have been affected by cancer, just like my own, know all too well that early diagnosis and treatment can save a life. According to research by Macmillan Cancer Support, there are over 70 people in my constituency and 50,000 across the UK with a missing cancer diagnosis. Cancer has not stopped during the pandemic, so with that in mind, will the Prime Minister commit to making the resurgence of cancer diagnosis services a top priority as restrictions begin to ease?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend; I know that this issue is very close to her heart, and she is right to raise it. Of course there are pressures from covid, but we are also worried that some people may not be coming forward for the cancer treatments that they need. I urge everybody who needs to get their treatment: help the NHS to help you. Come forward and get your treatment as you normally would.

[912107] **Lucy Powell** (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: The Prime Minister said in November that the £1.5 billion green homes grant would be extended to March 2022, yet in a written answer last week, the Minister for Business, Energy and Clean Growth said that the money would not be carried over from this financial year to next. With just seven weeks to go, a paltry £71 million has been spent so far. Why is he cutting £1 billion from the green homes grant that he promised for businesses, homeowners and the environment?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady is on to something, but she is barking up the wrong tree. We are not cutting the green homes grant. The problem is that there has not been enough take-up, and we want to encourage people to take it up and make use of the opportunity to reduce the carbon emissions of their homes.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con) [V]: The Prime Minister has said, and he has written in his foreword to the environment White Paper, that he is pledged to protect the countryside. The countryside is more than just a bit of green belt around the home counties. In Westgate, Birchington and Herne Bay in my constituency, and indeed across much of the garden of England, there are plans to smother acres of prime agricultural land in housing that is not needed for local people but that is needed to grow the crops to reduce the amount of food we import at a cost of carbon emissions. If the Prime Minister is the friend of the countryside, will he announce an immediate moratorium on the use of all farmland for housing, while the whole policy is reviewed?

The Prime Minister: I think I have just heard my right hon. Friend say that he wants an immediate moratorium on the construction of all housing. Maybe I misunderstood; I do not think that to be realistic. What I can certainly tell him is that we will take very seriously the points he makes. I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government has met him, and will be glad to meet him again, to discuss the subject he raises. However, this Government's commitment to nature and to the countryside is unmatched. We have just consecrated 30% of our land surface to nature.

[912110] **Neil Gray** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP) [V]: I had a meeting recently with the PCS about public sector pay and heard from constituents in Shotts and Calderbank who work for UK Government Departments, both of whom are struggling to cover a real-terms pay cut over decades—one has to take partial early retirement so that the lump sum can keep him going. What will the Prime Minister say to the Chancellor to convince him of the need to properly reward all those who have been on the frontline during the covid pandemic? Will he at the very least follow the Scottish Government's lead in fully funding a rise in public sector pay?

The Prime Minister: We have seen above-inflation increases in public sector pay, and that is quite right. We particularly support increases in investment in our NHS, and the hon. Gentleman will know of the package we have put in place for nurses. However, the single best thing we can do is support the living wage, which this Government introduced, and which we have now increased by record amounts two years in a row. [*Interruption.*] I see the Scottish nationalist party—forgive me, national. I do not know whether they are nationalists—perhaps they could clear it up.

Mr Speaker: We cleared it up earlier for you.

The Prime Minister: Are they a national party without being nationalists? It is an interesting semantic point, Mr Speaker. However, I think they are trying to claim that they pioneered the living wage. I do not think that is right. I seem to remember that it was a certain mayoralty in London that massively increased the living wage—when they were not off the starting blocks.

Mr Speaker: In which case, let us go down to Somerset to Ian Liddell-Grainger, who is ready on the starting blocks.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con) [V]: Mr Speaker, thank you as always. I am delighted my right hon. Friend is defending democracy by pushing ahead with local elections, but here in the

land of King Alfred the people desperately want to give their verdict on Somerset County Council, which I am afraid has been using covid money to spend on things that have nothing to do with the pandemic. It has submitted to the Government a form that says nothing, and I fear that my right hon. Friend has been misled. We need a referendum down here to test public opinion quickly, but does my right hon. Friend—a proud man of Somerset, who understands history more than most of us—not agree that the time has come to put our county back together and that the whole of Somerset should be looked after by Somerset? I know that King Alfred would approve of that, and I know that the people of Somerset will certainly support the Prime Minister if he supports us.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend, who is a great advocate of Somerset and is committed to his constituents. I thank him for what he is doing. He has raised this issue twice with me now, and I thank him for that, but may I humbly suggest that the best way forward is for the consultation to proceed and for local people to decide what the best form of local government is that they want?

[912113] **Mr Gregory Campbell** (East Londonderry) (DUP) [V]: The Prime Minister is now aware of the problems that we warned about over many months before the Northern Ireland protocol was introduced. These problems are scheduled to get worse from April. Will he outline a timeline, as indicated in last week's e-petition, whereby people in Northern Ireland, and indeed across the UK, will be able to enjoy free trade across the nation, including from GB to NI, like that enjoyed by every other independent trading nation?

The Prime Minister: Yes, indeed. I have made it absolutely clear to our EU friends and partners that we want to make our relationship work, but it is also absolutely essential that there should be untrammelled free trade and exchange of goods, people, services and capital through all parts of the UK. We will do everything we can to ensure that that is the case, including, as I have said in the Chamber before and to the hon. Gentleman's colleagues, invoking article 16 of the protocol, if necessary.

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

12.36 pm

Sitting suspended.

Building Safety

12.40 pm

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick): With permission, Mr Speaker, I want to make a statement on housing and building safety. Beyond the covid-19 pandemic, the Government want to build back better—better homes, better infrastructure and better communities. The foundation of those ambitions, and the mission of my Department, is safety and fairness. We have all been moved by the stories we have heard and the people we have met—homeowners placed in difficult and sometimes impossible situations through no fault of their own. I appreciate the frustration, the worry and the despair that at times they feel. I share their anger at the errors, the omissions, the false promises and even the outright dishonesty, which were built up over many decades but which this Government are determined to tackle.

That is why today I am announcing an unprecedented intervention—a clear plan to remove unsafe cladding, to provide certainty to leaseholders, to make the industry pay for its faults of the past, to create a world-class building safety regime and to inject confidence and certainty back into this part of the housing market. First, we will finish the job we have started on remediating unsafe cladding. After the tragedy of Grenfell Tower, the expert advice that this Government received identified aluminium composite cladding, or ACM—the material on the tower—as by far the most unsafe form of cladding. It should never have been used, and our independent expert advisory panel recommended that it should be the focus of our remediation work.

Thanks to a considerable effort, including during the pandemic, almost 95% of all high-rise buildings with unsafe ACM cladding identified by the beginning of last year have been remediated, or workers are on site now doing the job. That rises to 100% in social housing. Guided by expert advice, the work to remove other types of cladding that are also unsafe—albeit less so than ACM—where they pose a genuine risk to life is also under way.

It has always been our expectation—our demand—that building owners and developers should step up to meet the cost of this work. Where they have not, or where they no longer exist, the Government have stepped in, providing £1.6 billion to remediate unsafe cladding. However, it is clear that without further Government intervention many building owners will simply seek to pass these potentially very significant costs on to leaseholders, as this is often the legal position in the leases that they signed. That would risk punishing those who have worked hard and bought their own home, but who have, through no fault of their own, found themselves caught in an invidious situation. Importantly, it would also risk slowing down the critical works to make these homes safer.

I am therefore making an exceptional intervention today on behalf of the Government and providing certainty that leaseholders in high-rise residential buildings will face no cost for cladding remediation works. We will make further funding available to pay for the removal and replacement of unsafe cladding for all leaseholders in high-rise residential buildings of 18 metres and above, or above six storeys, in England. We continue to take a

safety-led approach, and this funding will focus on the higher-rise buildings, where the independent expert advisory panel tells us time and again the overwhelming majority of the safety risk lies, in line with the existing building safety fund and the anticipated scope of the new building safety regulator that we are establishing and will shortly be legislating for. This will ensure that we end the cladding scandal in a way that is fair and generous to leaseholders.

Secondly, for lower and medium-rise blocks of flats, the risks are significantly lower and the remediation of cladding is less likely to be needed; in many cases, it will not be needed at all, but where it is, costs can still be significant for leaseholders. That is why I am announcing today that the Government will develop a long-term scheme to protect leaseholders in this situation with financial support for cladding remediation on buildings of between four and six storeys. Under a long-term low-interest scheme, no leaseholder will ever pay more than £50 a month towards the removal of unsafe cladding, many far less.

Taken together, this means the Government are providing more than £5 billion, including a further £3.5 billion announced today, plus the significant cost of the very generous financing scheme, which will run for many years to come, to ensure that all leaseholders in medium and high-rise blocks face no costs or very low costs if cladding remediation is needed. Where it is needed, costs can still be significant for leaseholders, which is why we want to take these important steps. We want to ensure that the Government develop this long-term scheme, which will protect leaseholders with financial support. Taken together, this means that the Government are helping leaseholders to move forwards with greater certainty and more confidence about the future.

Thirdly, while the problem is not one of leaseholders' making, it also cannot be right that the costs of addressing these issues fall solely on taxpayers, many of whom are not themselves homeowners and can only dream of getting on the housing ladder. The Government have always expected the industry to contribute towards these costs, and some have done so. Today, I am announcing that we will introduce a gateway 2 developer levy, which will be implemented through the forthcoming Building Safety Bill. The proposed levy will be targeted and will apply only when developers seek permission to develop certain high-rise buildings in England, helping to ensure that the industry takes collective responsibility for historical building safety defects. In introducing the levy, we will continue to ensure that the homes our country needs get built and that our small and medium-sized builders are protected.

In addition, a new tax will be introduced for the UK residential property development sector in 2022. This will raise at least £2 billion over a decade to help to pay for cladding remediation costs. The tax will ensure that the largest property developers make a fair contribution to the remediation programme in relation to the money they make from residential property, reflecting the benefit that they will derive from restoring confidence to the UK housing market. The Government will consult on the policy design in due course.

Fourthly, I know there are many people across the country who are concerned about the safety of their home. In the actions we have taken and those we take today, we have already very clearly prioritised public safety. However, it is also important that we put the risk

[Robert Jenrick]

of a fire, and in particular the risk of a fatal fire, in context—it is low. Last year, the number of people who died in fires in blocks of flats over 11 metres was 10—an all-time low—and fire-related fatalities in dwellings in England have fallen by 29% over the past decade. By way of comparison, more than 1,700 fatalities were reported on our roads in 2019.

Of course, any death is one too many, and the tragedy of Grenfell Tower lingers with us and demands action. That is why it is right that we address safety issues where they exist and are a threat to life, but we must do so proportionately, guided at all times by expert advice. That is the approach that we are taking through the Building Safety Bill, the new building safety regulator, the Fire Safety Bill and the new national regulator for construction products, which I announced in January. I am determined that we will have a world-class building safety regime.

We need everyone to follow this sensible, proportionate approach so that this part of the housing market can move forward and homeowners are not disproportionately impacted. The Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors has consulted on new guidance for valuers on when an EWS1 form should be required. The Government endorse its work to ensure that assessors have a stronger basis on which to make good, proportionate judgments about valuation risk. Lenders have welcomed the progress on that guidance, which will help to ensure that more than half a million leaseholders in blocks of flats over 11 metres will not need a separate EWS1 assessment to get a mortgage. That builds on the interventions we have already made to create and train many more assessors, and we are doing more so that they can access professional indemnity insurance to get on with the job.

Today, in addition to providing certainty to leaseholders, we are providing confidence to lenders. Following discussions that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor and I have had with lenders, we expect all the major banks and building societies to strongly support today's intervention, which will provide greater certainty to the market and help to restore the effective lending, purchasing and selling of properties as soon as possible.

Taken together, this exceptional intervention amounts to the largest ever Government investment in building safety. We believe in home ownership, and today we firmly support the hundreds of thousands of homeowners who need our help now. I commend this statement to the House.

12.52 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab) [V]: I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. Buying a first home should be a dream come true, but for many it has been a nightmare for years. As a result of Government choices, three and a half years on from the Grenfell tragedy, in which 72 people lost their lives, hundreds of thousands of people are still trapped in unsafe homes and many more are unable to move. Today's announcement is too late for too many. It is a repeat of undelivered promises and backtracks on the key one—that leaseholders should have no costs to pay.

The Chancellor said last March that

“all unsafe combustible cladding will be removed from every private and social residential building above 18 metres high.”—[*Official Report*, 11 March 2020; Vol. 673, c. 291.]

But that has not happened. Buildings have not been able to access the fund, and £9 out of £10 is still sitting where it was. At every stage, the Government underestimated the problem, and delays caused it to grow. They still do not know how many buildings are unsafe, where they are and what danger they pose. Until we have answers to those basic questions, the Government will continue to make mistakes, offering piecemeal solutions that have to be updated when they do not deliver.

Can the Secretary of State guarantee that the funding will cover all buildings over 18 metres? What will the consequential be for the devolved Administrations, including Wales? We cannot have a repeat of the first come, first served free-for-all, whereby the most dangerous blocks risk being fixed last. Will the Government set up an independent taskforce, as Labour has asked for, to prioritise buildings according to risk, with powers to get the funds out the door and the ability to go after building owners who fail to get on with the work?

Ministers have now promised 17 times that leaseholders will not bear the cost of fixing a problem that they did not cause. Many will be listening to the Housing Secretary's remarks today, and the Government have betrayed their promise that leaseholders would not pay for the building safety crisis. As I said, three and a half years on from Grenfell, hundreds of thousands of people cannot sleep at night because their homes are unsafe. The Government have today chosen to pile financial misery on them—this is an injustice.

What does the Housing Secretary say to Julie in Runcorn, who lives in a flat with dangerous high-pressure laminate cladding? Her block is under 18 metres, so she is unable to access the funding promised so far. She lives in the same development as buildings that have the exact same cladding but are over 18 metres, so they will be able to access the fund. Why should this arbitrary 18-metre height limit mean the difference between a safe home and financial ruin? What are the terms of the loans? What will the interest rate be? Will leaseholders be required to pay the interest as well as the main cost? The right hon. Gentleman says that leaseholders will not pay more than £50 a month, but does that stay with the current owners when they move, or with the home so the new owner is forced to pay? How long does this run for? Will it go up by inflation each year? What will the Government do if those homes remain unsellable? How will they ensure that freeholders take up the loans? How will the Government speed up remediation, because the current stalemate cannot continue?

Other properties do not have dangerous cladding but people have been charged thousands of pounds per flat to fix other fire safety issues. What does the Housing Secretary say to them? The Government should focus on securing our economy and rebuilding from covid, not saddling homeowners with further debt. When they have further debt, that means less money for our economic recovery, taking money away from local shops. It reinforces regional imbalances, and it makes young first-time buyers and pensioners pay money they cannot afford. The Government should pursue those responsible fully, to prevent leaseholders and taxpayers from carrying the can.

The Government have announced a levy and a tax, which I welcome, because those responsible should bear the cost, but how much do the Government anticipate the levy will raise? Will they pursue others, such as cladding manufacturers, who are also responsible for

putting in the dangerous cladding? The Government have missed every target for removing ACM cladding, and 50,000 people are still living in flats wrapped in it—this is the same cladding as was found on Grenfell Tower—and thousands more have other dangerous cladding. Will the Secretary of State commit today to removing all dangerous cladding by 2022?

As the right hon. Gentleman will know, at least one first-time homeowner, Hayley, has already been made bankrupt before she was even asked to pay for remediation, just from the extra costs. She asked the Government to think about her former neighbours, so when will leaseholders start receiving funding to pay for the round-the-clock fire patrols they are being charged hundreds of pounds each month for? What about the skyrocketing insurance? How will the Government get the market moving? Their last announcement fell to pieces, and the housing market in affected homes is grinding to a halt. I have a simple question: what, on average, does he expect the leaseholder to be paying?

Government inaction and delay has caused the building safety crisis to spiral. People cannot continue to live in unsafe, unsellable homes. Homeowners should not face bankruptcy to fix a problem they did not cause. Unfortunately, these proposals will still leave too many people struggling and facing loans, instead of being given justice.

Robert Jenrick: I am pleased that the hon. Lady welcomes many of the proposals we have set out today. This is an unprecedented intervention, and it is one of the most generous, if not the most generous, of its kind anywhere in the world. She asks, importantly, why we have focused on high-rise buildings. We have done so because that is time and again where all the independent expert advice leads us. We must make these judgments on the basis of expert advice. With the greatest respect to the hon. Lady, I think we need to follow the expert advisers, not her instincts. We are focusing on the buildings over 18 metres, where the work needs to get done, and in those buildings we are ensuring that the leaseholder never pays. We want the building owners to step up and meet the cost, but where that is not possible—in many cases, I am afraid it is not, because the building owners are no longer around—the taxpayer will step in and meet the cost, with the advantage of the levy and the tax to help recoup the costs. That must be the right approach.

The hon. Lady asks whether enough progress has been made. Actually, we have ended 2020 with 95% of buildings over 18 metres with the most dangerous form of cladding—ACM cladding—either having been remediated or with workers on site doing the job. That is 100% of the buildings in the social sector, which is a huge step forward. I pay tribute to everyone who has been part of that over the course of the year, including those keeping the works going during the pandemic, which many politicians, including Labour politicians, asked us not to do. That was the wrong judgment, but we kept those works going.

For lower-rise buildings—those of four to six storeys—we are bringing into play this important new financing scheme. That means that those leaseholders who at the moment have impossible costs, causing great worry and strain, will now be able to have the reassurance that those costs will be turned into manageable ones. They will never need to pay more than £50 a month—many will pay far less—and only where the cladding really

does need to come off to ensure that the building is safe. That will provide peace of mind to hundreds of thousands of leaseholders, and I think it can be seen as a generous, affordable way forward for the taxpayer.

We have to remember that, when the Prime Minister and I came to office 18 months ago, there was only £200 million of Government money available to support leaseholders in this situation, and that that in itself was the result of incredibly hard work by my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire). Today, 18 months later, there are many billions of pounds of support in direct Government grant and then billions more, no doubt, in financing scheme funding available to support those leaseholders and to get the situation under control.

Meanwhile, what is happening in other parts of the country? We know that, in Scotland, according to a recent freedom of information request, the Scottish Government have done absolutely nothing. The funding they received from the building safety fund is sat in a bank account in Edinburgh, and they have done nothing with it. I would be interested to know from the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debonnaire) what the Welsh Government are doing. I do not know. Perhaps she can inform us. The hon. Lady herself came to this late. It was only a week or so ago that she convened the first debate on this in her tenure. She did not offer a plan. She did not show an appreciation of the scale and complexity of the issue. She offered a taskforce, a committee. Empty words, I am afraid, and gestures. That is not good enough.

While the hon. Lady was doing that, the Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor and I were working with the lenders, the insurers, the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors and the leaseholder groups to bring forward what we have announced today, which I hope all fair-minded Members across the House will see as a significant intervention. It does get unsafe cladding off buildings and end the cladding scandal. It does provide reassurance and confidence to leaseholders. It does ensure that the developers and the industry pay their fair share. It does build a world-class building safety regime, and it does enable us now to move forward to reopen and restore confidence in the housing market so that the country can move forward again.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con) [V]: May I first say that I am a leaseholder who is neither affected by the problem nor gaining by the solution?

We recognise that this is another set of major steps along the way. During the last three years, the problems have been spelled out by the all-party parliamentary group on leasehold and commonhold reform, and I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) for working together in a cross-party way. There will be more to do, and the Select Committee will no doubt have hearings.

Will my right hon. Friend thank the Chancellor and the Prime Minister for helping to make the funding available? I do not claim that it is going to be enough, but it is a major step forward and I recognise that.

There is a problem with those in low-rise accommodation in low-income areas seeing high-rises in high-income areas getting more direct help. Will my right hon. Friend talk about that?

[*Sir Peter Bottomley*]

Can he also confirm that no leaseholder who does not actually own anything will have to sign away any of their rights to eventual compensation, as and when the inquiry finishes and any civil claims of liability against developers, cladding manufacturers, local building control or national regulators come to be finalised?

Robert Jenrick: I praise my hon. Friend for his determined campaigning on the issue over many years, which I think everybody in the House has recognised and for which many leaseholders will no doubt be grateful. I have been pleased to work with him and to take his advice when it has been needed. I assure him that the funding that we have made available today will provide leaseholders with the certainty and confidence that they need. Any leaseholder in a building of over 18 metres will now know that they will not have to pay for the removal of cladding, and leaseholders in the buildings that are lower rise—11 to 18 metres—can take great comfort from the fact that this new financing arrangement will be in place. It does not preclude any actions by the building or the leaseholders against insurers, those holding warranties or the developers, and those actions should take place. We want to see those who made these mistakes brought to book. We do not want this all to fall on the taxpayer; that is absolutely essential. This is a very difficult judgment. We have to ensure that we are striking the right balance between the interests of leaseholders who are homeowners and those of the broader taxpayer. I think we have done that today, and I hope that this is a major step forward in the battle against this issue.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP) [V]: The announcement today of an additional £3.5 billion is encouraging as far as it goes, and I am sure that the Scottish Government look forward to the sequentials arising from it. What the Secretary of State has said will offer some relief to homeowners affected by cladding issues, many of whom are already struggling with bills and simply do not feel able to take on more debt as their dream homes have become a nightmare, with mortgage valuations of zero due to unsafe cladding. As he knows, the consequences have been far-reaching for those caught up in this scandal, with homes currently worth nothing that cannot be sold and in which residents feel unsafe. I very much welcome the responsibility for cladding being borne—in part, at least—by the larger players in the industry, but more details as to how that works are needed.

Despite the Secretary of State saying that no leaseholder will ever pay back more than £50 a month in loans to remove this cladding, I am sure that he will understand that that will still be disappointing for many, since, through no fault of their own, they are still facing additional costs after buying their homes in good faith; they face debt that they do not want and which will impact on household incomes during these difficult times. Much more detail on exactly how these low-interest loans will work is needed. Can the Secretary of State confirm that there will be an upper limit to these additional costs for leaseholders, or is the £50 cap only a monthly cap? He will appreciate that this matters because building work so often overruns. Will he also tell me within what timeframe he expects this remediation work to be completed?

Robert Jenrick: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for welcoming much of the substance of today's announcement. I draw her back to my earlier remarks: to the best of my knowledge, the Scottish Government have made no use at all of the funding that they have been provided with through the existing building safety fund. Important questions now need to be answered by her Government in Scotland as to what is actually happening there. What are they doing to support leaseholders? How are they making those buildings safe?

With respect to the financing scheme that we are bringing forward in England, it will be a matter for the Scottish Government—or, indeed, the Welsh or Northern Irish Administrations—to decide whether they wish to create a similar scheme. We have set an upper limit of £50 a month, which provides a great deal of comfort to leaseholders that they will never need to pay more than that per month. That is about the equivalent of the average service charge for a purpose-built block of flats. I appreciate that it is a cost that no one would wish to bear, but it is a reasonable one in balancing the interests of the taxpayer with providing support and protection to the leaseholder. We will bring forward further details on how that scheme works as quickly as we can.

It is important also to say that the arrangement that we will be creating is not a loan to an individual; it is a financing scheme with buildings. The loans do not sit with the individual and will not affect their credit rating. These are loans on a long tenure that will remain with the building, ensuring that the leaseholders themselves can move on with their lives.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for working so closely with me on cladding issues over the past 15 months. I have been calling for a substantial and comprehensive package for cladding remediation, so I warmly welcome this announcement, which, importantly, allows funds to be deployed very quickly and does not require taskforces or legislation. I have called for a package of £5 billion to £10 billion; I quickly tried to tot up all the numbers as the Secretary of State went through the details, and I think this funding could be approaching certainly the middle if not the upper end of that range. Will he confirm that and assure me that money will be deployed as quickly as possible?

Robert Jenrick: I praise my hon. Friend, who has been a fantastic Member of Parliament for Kensington since she was elected and has raised with me this and other issues arising out of the Grenfell tragedy almost every week—in fact, we meet every week to discuss these issues.

My hon. Friend is right to say that this is a very substantial intervention. We have already made £1.6 billion available, and we estimate that it will require another £3.5 billion to complete the remediation of unsafe cladding on buildings over 18 metres and to make good on the promise we have made today to leaseholders. In addition to that, we will bring forward the financing scheme, the details of which, as I said, will be published shortly, but it is a very generous scheme and there is a significant cost to the taxpayer in ensuring that the £50 cap gives that added level of protection and reassurance to leaseholders.

The total intervention that we are making today is, as my hon. Friend says, one of many, many billions of pounds. That is a difficult judgment, which the Prime

Minister and the Chancellor have made with me, but we believe this is a fair and generous settlement to help everybody to move forward.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab) [V]: On behalf of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, I thank the Secretary for his statement and welcome it—as far as it goes, because in terms of the Select Committee recommendations, it only goes so far. I invite him to come back to the Select Committee to discuss the issues in more detail shortly after the recess. First, immediately, will he confirm that as a result of the loan scheme, no leaseholder will be placed in negative equity? Secondly, has he done any assessment of the total amount of additional non-cladding costs to deal with building safety that will fall on leaseholders? Finally, will he confirm that there is no help in his statement for councils and housing associations, and that as a result, to carry out essential safety work, they are going to have to put up rents, cut maintenance or cut the number of affordable homes that they can build?

Robert Jenrick: I thank the hon. Gentleman and the members of the Select Committee for their expert advice on this issue over a number of years, and to me personally as Secretary of State. I would of course be delighted to come before the Committee to discuss this issue further in the near future.

The hon. Gentleman says that this announcement does not go as far as he would have liked. I appreciate that sentiment, and no doubt there will be leaseholders watching today who would wish us to go even further, but this is a very significant intervention—we do have to keep coming back to that fact. Broadly speaking, English property rights are based on caveat emptor—buyer beware—and the contents of the leases, contracts, warranties and insurance policies that we as homeowners sign. What we are doing today is stepping in in a way that Governments have not done in the past—that they have not done when people's homes have been flooded or subject to subsidence or other unforeseen and incredibly difficult and challenging issues. We have chosen to do this because we have immense sympathy for the leaseholders affected and, as a matter of basic public safety, we have to get these unsafe materials off buildings as quickly as possible. I think this is the right judgment and the right balance to strike between the interests of the leaseholder and those of the broader taxpayer, but I would be delighted to come before the hon. Gentleman's Committee to discuss this issue in more detail soon.

Kate Griffiths (Burton) (Con) [V]: I welcome the measures that my right hon. Friend has set out, but may I urge him to review the long-term issues here? Profitability should not come before safety. Will he look into the issue that I hear about regularly of new build properties not being built to high enough standards, leaving homeowners spending months chasing developers to come back and fix problems with their homes?

Robert Jenrick: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. We all believe in home ownership. We want to get more people on to the housing ladder, and we know that owning a home is one of the most special achievements in life. But we also know that, in recent years, some of our developers—and some of our most prominent ones, too—have built homes that are to a poor standard; they

have admitted it in some cases. We need to make sure that that is corrected, so that the quality of homes in this country is high and members of the public can have confidence when making that life-changing investment.

It cannot be right that buying a home affords someone less protection than buying a mobile phone or many other things we do in our daily lives. We want to see a major change in the culture of the industry, so that homeowners get the product—the brilliant, beautiful, high-quality home—that they deserve. We have set up a new homes ombudsman, which will be passed into law as part of the building safety regulator. The new regulatory regime, which is already in existence in shadow form, will be put into permanent form through the passing of the Building Safety Bill. For higher-rise buildings—those over 18 metres—that will create a very strict, world-class regulatory regime.

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab) [V]: I agree with everything my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) said, with knobs on. My constituents will not be reassured by what they have heard. Loans for leaseholders still are not off the table. The Secretary of State has avoided talking about non-cladding costs, and there is still no guarantee that my constituents will not be left with large associated bills for problems they did not create. A number of institutions are profiteering from this crisis, including parts of the insurance industry and others, with eye-watering premiums. Why are we still waiting for the Secretary of State to get a grip on this crisis?

Robert Jenrick: I am disappointed by the tone of the hon. Lady's remarks. She has followed this issue closely and has fought for her constituents, and I praise her and recognise her for that hard work, but this Government have done a huge amount, and I entirely reject her accusations. We have brought forward the public inquiry. We have planned and are now legislating for a new building safety regulator—a world-class regulatory regime. We have brought in people to ensure that the unsafe cladding on ACM-clad high-rise buildings is remediated, and that work has progressed a great deal over the course of the year. As I said earlier, many Labour politicians, including the Mayor of London, opposed that initially, at the height of the pandemic. We have done a great deal, but there is more to be done.

I do not know what the hon. Lady's proposition is with respect to other materials beyond cladding. All the expert opinion says, "Focus on cladding. That is the primary risk here—that is the focus that Government should have." I will keep following expert advice. If the Labour party's position is that we should not follow that, and that in fact the Chancellor should write a blank cheque and say that absolutely any building safety defect on any building of any height should be paid for by the taxpayer, that is a very substantial cost, and I would be interested to know how she intends to fund that. With respect to the insurance companies, I do now expect them to step up and ensure that their premiums are proportionate and risk-based, because I think some of them have been exploiting leaseholders in a very difficult position.

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con) [V]: I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement; it was clearly the right one. What leaseholders will ultimately care

[Shaun Bailey]

about is making sure that this remediation is done. What work is he undertaking with small and medium-sized enterprises, such as S Bayliss Roofing and Cladding in Tipton, to make sure that they can get this work done, so that leaseholders can finally be free of this dangerous cladding and the impact that it has on their status as homeowners?

Robert Jenrick: The approach that I took when I became Secretary of State was to set a target for us that we would either remediate all buildings or get the workers on site by the end of last year. As I say, with a few exceptions—largely because of the covid-19 pandemic—we achieved that. We have used project managers and consultants to ensure that every single building in that cohort is being individually managed. My Ministers and I have been meeting with the contractors, the leaders of local councils, the chief executives and the residents' management associations of those buildings regularly to ensure that progress is happening. That work needs to continue and to broaden out to all those buildings that will benefit from today's announcement.

My hon. Friend is also right to say that today's announcement will create certainty and confidence for the broader construction sector to come forward and enter the market to do this work. That will create thousands of jobs, and I encourage businesses large and small to take part in this major initiative.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab) [V]: I am pleased that the Secretary of State wants to tackle rising insurance premiums, but I have spoken to many leaseholders in my constituency of Luton South who have faced the additional costs of interim safety measures, such as waking watch, and of fixing other fire safety issues, which the Secretary of State seemed to push back on. These joined-up financial pressures are pushing many leaseholders near to bankruptcy, so what are the Government doing to help bring down these costs?

Robert Jenrick: We are working with the insurance sector, which I think now needs to take a more proportionate, risk-based approach. These might be outliers, but some of the examples I have heard of insurance premiums rising by 1,000% are completely out of kilter with the statistics I gave earlier, that last year only 10 people tragically died in buildings over 11 metres, and only 41 people died in any house fire at all in this country. With respect to waking watch, I think that is a very challenging issue, but we have brought forward our £30 million fund to replace waking watches with high-quality, effective fire alarm systems. That fund is now open, and I encourage any building—perhaps including the one in the hon. Lady's constituency—to apply for it, get the fire alarm installed and then hopefully reduce those costs quickly.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con) [V]: I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement and know that many people in my constituency and across the country will be relieved that the Government are taking further action on the issue of unsafe cladding. Does he agree that speed is of the essence, and will he confirm that the additional financial remediation will

help relieve the worry and remove unfair and unfounded costs on leaseholders to deal with the removal of unsafe cladding?

Robert Jenrick: I certainly can, and I thank my right hon. Friend for the work he has done on behalf of his constituents. We have corresponded many times on this subject. Today's announcement will provide comfort and reassurance to hundreds of thousands of leaseholders. I also draw his attention and that of the House to the work we are doing with RICS, which will ensure that about 50% of those individuals who might have required and EWS1 form will now no longer need to go through that laborious and often expensive process.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD) [V]: When there was a failure of regulation in the City, the Government bailed out the banks in a matter of days, to the tune of £500 billion. In the face of a failure of fire safety regulation, when people are terrified of burning to death in their homes, the Government have taken three and a half years and offered only £6 billion. My constituents are still facing the costs of non-cladding fire safety problems, waking watches and more, so when will the Government accept the basic principle that cladding victims should not have to pay a penny to fix fire safety problems that are not of their making?

Robert Jenrick: Actually, the Government acted decisively in the immediate aftermath of Grenfell Tower. Expert opinion has evolved over time. The first expert advice that the Government received was, as I said earlier, to focus on ACM cladding—the type of cladding on Grenfell Tower—and on those buildings over 18 metres. We put in place the funding to do that where the building owners and the industry were not able to, or would not, pay themselves. The expert advice then said that there were other materials that were somewhat less unsafe but which, none the less, still could be unsafe. That work is under way, and the Chancellor gave an extra £1 billion to do that at the Budget a year ago. Now, we have brought forward this very substantial intervention today. We are working intensively and extensively to tackle the issue, and I hope that today's intervention will be a permanent and lasting settlement.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con) [V]: I thank the Secretary of State for his statement on building safety. Warrington does not have any apartments over 18 metres, which would require remediation, but I have heard from a number of parents concerned that their sons and daughters are paying additional charges, levied by landlords, to cover the cost of insurance and waking watches in apartments that they have purchased. What steps are the Government taking to cover these costs, so that the burden does not fall on families in my constituency?

Robert Jenrick: The announcement that we have made today and the work that the Chancellor and I have done with each of the major retail banks, which strongly support the intervention, give much greater confidence to lenders, surveyors and insurers to re-enter the market, to bring down those premiums, to lend against these buildings and to enable the market to move forward again. This will take time and there is more to be done, but I think we will see the market moving forward now in a way that it has not done in recent months.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab) [V]: The Secretary of State has referred to fairness and the need for building companies to step up and I understand that he is introducing a levy on those companies, but what more is he doing to pursue those responsible for building unsafe homes, leaving the taxpayers and leaseholders to meet the clean-up costs?

Robert Jenrick: The hon. Lady raises an extremely important matter. Let me be absolutely clear: the first thing that the Government have done is establish the independent Grenfell inquiry. That has already heard some absolutely shocking allegations of malpractice and, in fact, outright dishonesty among some of the construction products manufacturers. It will be a matter for the police whether they choose to take forward criminal prosecutions against individuals or companies involved. On remediation, we want the building owners to pay. Some have, and I am grateful to them for that. In fact, some of the large volume house builders, even today, have come forward saying that they will pay more. That needs to continue, and nothing that I have said today should take away from that. They should still come forward, as well as paying their fair share through the levy and the tax that I have announced today.

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con) [V]: I thank my right hon. Friend for making this significant intervention, but will he assure me that the industry responsible, which includes some of the wealthiest individuals and organisations in the land, will be paying its fair share, as taxpayers, many of whom are not homeowners, are already being hit hard enough?

Robert Jenrick: The levy and the tax that I have announced today and that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor and I will be setting out more details on ensure that the industry pays its fair share, in addition to it stepping up and paying for the remediation of buildings for which it has responsibility. It has to be said that there is no simple solution to this. Many of the builders and developers who constructed these buildings are long gone—they have gone into administration or they are shell companies offshore. This is not a simple challenge to fix, as some have suggested, but I hope the measures that we have taken today will go a long way.

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab) [V]: A number of Members have said that getting any money out of Government has proved painfully slow, so leaseholders today are facing extra costs for insurance while their buildings remain unsafe. Building insurance for the Ropeworks in Barking rocketed from £70,000 to £650,000—a 900% hike in just two years. The Association of British Insurers has told me that Ministers have refused to engage to find an urgent, practical way forward now. Will the Minister assure us today that the Government will immediately engage with all insurers and take on some of that short-term risk, so that leaseholders can buy affordable cover until their buildings are made safe?

Robert Jenrick: I pay tribute to the right hon. Lady for the work that she has done. She and I have worked together since the terrible fire that her constituents suffered in Barking. She is right to raise the issue of insurance, as other Members of the House have done already. There is a challenge here, because, as with the

lenders, the insurers are faced with assessing a new and heightened level of risk. None the less the Association of British Insurers now needs to step up and take a proportionate risk-based approach. As I have said repeatedly, the risk to life in buildings is, mercifully, very low, with the tragic exception of the events of 2017. Insurers should be pricing that risk correctly and not passing on those costs or even profiteering on the backs of the leaseholders. Both myself and my hon. Friend Lord Greenhalgh who leads on building safety have engaged repeatedly with insurers and we will do so again.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con) [V]: I welcome this very significant intervention and the relief that it will bring to so many people. Does the Secretary of State agree that we have established a very important principle today—that if developers ever behave in this manner again, the Government will come after them, and not the hard-pressed taxpayer, to put these issues right?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We all feel immense sympathy for the leaseholders, who are innocent parties in this situation, but it also is not right that the taxpayer—the broader taxpayer, many of whom are not home owners at all—should have to step in and foot the bill. We have tried to strike a balance today in terms of ensuring that the developers, the builders and the industry behind this pay a fair share. The draft Building Safety Bill that we will introduce later this year will bring forward a very tight regulatory regime so that buildings over 18 metres—the high-rise buildings—are built to a very high standard and these issues should not happen again.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Leaseholders in Hornsey and Wood Green have been trapped for the third lockdown in a terrible situation with building defects, unsure when they can get a mortgage to move on from their property. One said,
“I’m at my wit’s end with a small new-born baby”,
so I hope that today will bring her some succour. What about housing associations, which, after 10 years of austerity, simply do not have the money to be able to give much relief to desperate leaseholders? Does the Secretary of State have any good news for those leaseholders?

Robert Jenrick: The hon. Lady raises an important point. We have been working very closely with local authorities since the start of this issue in the immediate aftermath of the Grenfell tragedy. I have engaged repeatedly with the National Housing Federation, which has done excellent work in this regard. We did provide funding to help support them. We are focusing the funding that we have provided on those housing associations or local councils that cannot fund this themselves, either through their own reserves or their ability to borrow. Most housing associations can do that, but there will be a small number that cannot. Of course there are choices at every turn, and that, in itself, will have consequences and make it harder for those housing associations to invest in more affordable and social housing, or other important aims that they and I share, like making buildings more energy-efficient to meet our climate obligations. That is the difficult situation that we find ourselves in. I am also acutely aware of the challenges

[Robert Jenrick]

faced by shared owners, and we will make particular provision to protect them so that they do not have to meet disproportionate costs with regard to cladding remediation.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab) [V]: In my constituency I have a number of buildings that are below 18 metres. Today's announcement means that leaseholders of these buildings will still need to foot the bill, and the offer of loans is small comfort to my constituents, many of whom are already struggling. What does the Secretary of State say to my constituents who were promised that leaseholders would not have to pay for a crisis they did not cause?

Robert Jenrick: Let me be clear on this point once again. The expert advice is very clear. It says that we should focus our attention on the buildings where there is a higher risk—buildings over 18 metres—so it is right that the Government choose to do that when they are using such large sums of taxpayer money. For buildings between 11 and 18 metres—between approximately four and six storeys—we are bringing forward this financing scheme, which will enable leaseholders to move forward with confidence and certainty in the knowledge that they will never need to pay more than £50 a month to meet the cladding remediation, where that absolutely needs to be done. I go back to the point that I have tried to make repeatedly: in many, many cases it will not need to be done because we want surveyors and the industry to take a proportionate, risk-based approach that takes true account of the risk to life in those properties, which for most leaseholders, mercifully, is very low.

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con) [V]: Too many people in Eastbourne have suffered the stress and the strain of looming costs, and today there will be some relief at the announcement that my right hon. Friend has made. It is a significant intervention and I look forward to seeing the details. It recognises fairness and balance, and I welcome that also. Although we are focusing today on cladding, what further work will be done to help those leaseholders facing costs in relation to other fire safety defects—involving firebreaks, fire doors and those necessary works that can be very costly too—which were also exposed in the wake of the Grenfell tragedy?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend has championed her constituents in this regard, and she and I have discussed the issue in the past. I hope the announcement will provide comfort to some of the constituents I am aware of in Eastbourne. One building in particular that we have corresponded on is above 18 metres, so will certainly be a beneficiary of the scheme, if it has not been a beneficiary of previous ones.

My hon. Friend is right to raise the fact that other building safety defects, which we have spoken about in the past, have also come to light, whether that is fire blocks, insulation or fire doors. Some of those works will need to be done, taking a proportionate, risk-based approach, where there is a true risk to life, so that the bill for the leaseholders is not disproportionate. We also, of course, want to see the building owners step up and pay for those works. Where there has been poor workmanship,

the building owner needs to take responsibility, and we will continue to do everything we can to support leaseholders to pursue those claims.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab) [V]: I welcome the intervention this afternoon and the Secretary of State's acknowledgment of the despair and sheer anger that people and families have experienced while they have been living in unsafe homes due to unsafe cladding. However, I put it to him that what my constituents want to hear is clear timescales for this remedial work, as it has now been nearly four years since so many lives were lost in the Grenfell fire. Leaseholders need reassurance that they will not need to wait another four years. Will the Secretary of State please also explain why leaseholders should be made to pay hidden or other costs for a problem they did not cause? Is this the best the Government can do? Is this what they consider to be fair?

Robert Jenrick: I do think this is a fair intervention. It is the largest of its type I think any Government in this country have ever made. It is a balance between the interests of the leaseholders and those of the broader taxpayer, as I have already said.

In terms of wider building safety defects, as I said in answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell), we will do everything we can to support leaseholders to pursue action against those who made those errors and omissions in the past. I share the anger of leaseholders at the mistakes that have been made—both by industry and by regulators who came before us. What we must do now as a Government is move forward, make sure this never happens again and support leaseholders as much as we practically can, and that is exactly what we intend to do.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): May I once again say a word on behalf of a group of people who hardly ever get a mention in this Chamber, namely, the poor, benighted general taxpayers? Barely a single one of my 75,000 constituents lives in a house or block of flats over four storeys high, and although they live in poor rural areas they are once again being asked to bail others out—in this case, greedy developers in wealthy areas. Can we have a balance?

Before I finish, may I also ask my right hon. Friend about Lincoln University, which has been forced to reclad one of its residences? What discussions has he had with the universities and with his Education colleague on this issue?

Robert Jenrick: On the important second point that my right hon. Friend raises, we have worked with the Department for Education and the Department of Health on buildings in the wider public sector—universities, student halls of residence and, in a small number of cases, buildings in the NHS—to ensure that the works there proceed at pace. I will happily update him with respect to Lincoln University.

The first point that my right hon. Friend made is actually extremely important. We have had to strike a careful balance because millions of our fellow citizens are not homeowners, and we have to protect their interests, just as we want to provide safety and fairness for the leaseholder. That is the balance that we have tried to

strike today, and I hope that fair-minded people on both sides of the House and in the country will appreciate that and understand the choices that we have made.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: I welcome today's announcement, which is a testament to the campaigning of leaseholders across the country. I am sure that the Secretary of State believes that the deal he has negotiated with the Treasury is a great success, but for many of my constituents it will make no or little material difference. A number of leaseholders continue to pay thousands of pounds for interim safety measures. The issue at hand today is one of principle and fairness, and the upshot for many constituents is that they are still paying, despite the Government's assurances. If the Government subscribe to the principle that no leaseholder should have to pay for fire safety problems, will the Secretary of State please explain why this package clearly shows that not all leaseholders are treated equally?

Robert Jenrick: The hon. Lady is wrong. Thousands of her constituents will directly benefit from today's announcement. We have chosen rightly, on the basis of expert advice, to prioritise buildings of over 18 metres. That is where the greatest risk is. It would be quite wrong for us to direct public money—taxpayers' money—to buildings where the risk is low or extremely remote, so we are targeting that money on the buildings that need it most. In those buildings, leaseholders can have certainty that they will not be paying for the remediation of unsafe cladding. It will be paid for either by the building owner—the developer—which is quite right, or by the taxpayer. We will use the levy and the new tax to recoup as much of that as we possibly can.

In other buildings where the risk is significantly lower, the new financing arrangement will give people real comfort that they never need to pay more than £50 a month. My expectation is that many of them will pay significantly less. I think most reasonable people would see that sum of money as truly affordable and manageable within the budget of most homeowners.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con) [V]: I thank my right hon. Friend for all his hard work on this, and I welcome what he has announced today. May I ask him what the Scottish and Welsh Governments are doing to improve building safety?

Robert Jenrick: I honestly do not know. The Scottish Government have, as far as I am aware, done nothing with the very significant sum of money that the Chancellor has given them through the Barnett consequential process. I am not aware of what the Welsh Government are doing. I think those questions are better directed to the Scottish Government and the Welsh Labour Administration.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab) [V]: The Secretary of State has said that his mission is safety and fairness for leaseholders. How do today's proposals protect a leaseholder who has been paying £50 a month but still has a large loan outstanding on their home at the point of sale, because of the cost of removing unsafe cladding? Is the truth not that the Secretary of State has failed to deliver on his promises of fairness, and that he is choosing to leave thousands of leaseholders facing massive costs?

Robert Jenrick: The hon. Gentleman, for whom I have great respect, misunderstands the scheme that we have just announced. For buildings of between four and six storeys, where the risk is much lower, leaseholders will have the opportunity, if they wish—there will be no compulsion—to take advantage of the financing scheme. That loan scheme financing arrangement will sit with the building, not with the individual. It will not affect the individual's personal credit rating, and it should not have a material impact on the value of their property. It will be akin to paying somewhat more on their service charge every month. As I say, it will be capped at £50 a month, which is similar to the average service charge. Of course, in many buildings the service charge is already far in excess of that.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con) [V]: In drawing the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, may I say to my right hon. Friend that I think this is one of the most generous and innovative schemes anywhere? In buildings to which the finance loan scheme is applicable, will it apply to non-cladding costs that nevertheless contain a material health and safety element—for example, fire doors and asbestos?

Robert Jenrick: We have chosen to focus both the grant scheme and the financing arrangements on cladding. That is for good reason, because the expert advice that we have received from the independent panel has consistently been that cladding is the greatest danger that needs to be combated. There may be other defects in buildings, and they will vary widely from building to building. They will have to be a matter for the building owner and for the homeowner. We, as a Government, are going to tackle the big issue here, which is cladding. We are going to end the cladding scandal that began with the Grenfell Tower tragedy.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab) [V]: I welcome the funding that has been announced as a step in the right direction, but unfortunately it is likely to cover only around half the anticipated cost, and the innocent leaseholder will be picking up the bill for the other half. The Secretary of State has said that he has sympathy for leaseholders, but that sympathy does not appear to extend below 18 metres. That directly contradicts the promise, which has been repeatedly made, that no leaseholder would have to pay anything. I deeply regret the Government's decision to break that promise and create another injustice. Can the Secretary of State say how many leaseholders he estimates will be subject to the loan scheme that he has announced today?

Robert Jenrick: We do not want any leaseholders to be paying for fire safety defects; we want that to be paid for by the building owners, the developers and the builders—the people who did this in the first place. As I said, there are circumstances where that is not possible, because there are building owners who no longer exist, who have gone bankrupt or who are shell companies overseas. That is the world we are dealing with. This is complex and multifaceted; it is not simple. In those situations where that is not possible, buildings above 18 metres, where the greatest risk lies, will take advantage of the new scheme and no leaseholder in that situation will have to pay for the remediation of unsafe cladding. Below 18 metres, where the risk is significantly lower,

[Robert Jenrick]

guided by our expert opinion, the financing arrangements will be in place. This is a comprehensive plan to provide comfort, reassurance, certainty and confidence to as many leaseholders as possible.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab) [V]: Yesterday, it was revealed that the company that made the Grenfell Tower cladding shamefully and knowingly sold flammable materials to construction projects because it was about £4 cheaper than fire-retardant cladding. It has taken the Government all these years to propose measures that will stop companies prioritising savings over life, yet they still have not bothered to identify all the buildings, including care homes and hospitals, that may have unsafe cladding. Why is that?

Robert Jenrick: The hon. Lady is wrong; as a matter of fact, we moved swiftly. We set up the Grenfell inquiry, which has heard those shocking allegations. We brought forward the Judith Hackitt review of building safety, which concluded that the regulatory regime needed to change. We have drafted and are now bringing forward the legislation to do that. I hope that the hon. Lady and Opposition Members will vote for the Fire Safety Bill and the Building Safety Bill when they come before this House soon, because that is the best way of creating the new regime, holding developers to account and making sure that local fire and rescue services and councils have the powers they need to take action against unsafe buildings.

I, too have been shocked by the allegations I have heard at the inquiry, which is why, as an interim step, before we hear the judge's recommendations, I have announced that we are going to create a new national regulator of construction products and that I am going to review the testing procedures for construction products, which seem to be woefully inadequate.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con) [V]: I thank my right hon. Friend for listening to the representations our Select Committee, the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, has made, and to other colleagues. People who live in high-rise buildings will be breathing a sigh of relief after his announcements today,

and I thank him for those. For the people who live in medium-rise blocks, we need to reserve judgment, in order to make sure we examine the details of his announcements. May I ask him specifically about the applications for the fund he has previously been running? There are some 1,100 incomplete applications, many of which require survey work to be undertaken. There is an issue as to whether the industry has the capacity to do that and whether that work will actually demonstrate what is needed. More importantly, the cost of those surveys has to be borne by someone. So what is he doing to ensure that those surveys are carried out and the applications to the fund are then made complete, so that work can continue on the buildings that are currently unsafe?

Robert Jenrick: I thank my hon. Friend for his support and advice in recent months, and that of all members of the Select Committee. We have received a large number of applications to the fund that, as he says, are incomplete. That reflects the fact that many building owners do not know as much as they should about the materials on their buildings, so a great deal of work needs to be done to assess them so that they can be funded, the work can be contracted and we can get workers on site to do the important building safety work as quickly as possible.

There is a particular problem, which my hon. Friend allights on, with respect to the number of fully trained, competent assessors who can go out and do that important first step. We are working with the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors to dramatically increase the number of fully trained assessors. That work has started and the numbers are already increasing. We are also working with the Treasury so that those individuals are not merely trained but can get the professional indemnity insurance that they need to do the job. If we can bring those two things together—that is happening quickly—we will be able to have a very significant increase in the number of individuals going out, doing the assessments, helping to give certainty to individuals and getting the works started.

1.49 pm

Sitting suspended.

Essay Mills (Prohibition)

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

1.53 pm

Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con) [V]: I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to prohibit the operation and advertising of essay mill services; and for connected purposes.

Companies that encourage students, researchers and even school pupils to part with money in return for work that can be passed off as their own should have no place in a modern society that recognises the power of knowledge to improve individual lives, train young people for their role in society and achieve their potential, yet in the UK those services and their operations currently remain entirely legal. It is that unacceptable feature of the British education system that my Bill seeks to change.

These so-called essay mills are a rot that infects the very discipline of learning and has the potential to damage academic integrity beyond repair. It is sad to say that it is a rot that is spreading, not only in higher education but across all forms and levels of education, from schools to further education colleges. The online presence of essay mills and their websites, which encourage contract cheating, is all-pervasive.

Three years ago, it was estimated that 115,000 students at UK universities were buying essays. Then, 46 vice-chancellors wrote a joint letter calling for these websites to be banned. This call is now supported by Universities UK, the Russell Group, GuildHE, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education and indeed most, if not all, of the higher education institutions and organisations that I have had the privilege of working with both as Universities Minister, and now as co-chair of the all-party university group. For me, the most passionate advocates of ending essay mills have been the students themselves and student unions, which have campaigned determinedly against their operation.

For each week that passes during the covid pandemic, the situation is only growing worse. Students have been forced to study remotely from home, away from campus welfare and support, and in taking their studies and exams online, they are extremely and increasingly a prey to essay mills, of which the number has increased dramatically. The QAA has revealed today that there are at least 932 sites in operation in the UK, up from 904 in December 2020, 881 in October 2020 and 635 back in June 2018. Their increased presence is even boasted of on a website, www.uktopwriters.com, which provides a “compare the market” service.

It is not just the number, but the nature of the threat that is expanding. Research published this month by Dr Thomas Lancaster and Codrin Cotarlan in the *International Journal for Educational Integrity* points to the extremely concerning phenomenon of students using file share websites, such as Chegg, to request exam answers in real time and to receive answers live during the course of an examination. Indeed, the number of STEM—science, technology, engineering and maths—student requests for this practice has risen by 196% over the past year.

In this year of all years, we should be in no doubt that essay mills are seeking to ruthlessly take advantage of the pandemic. One site is even offering cut-price deals for essays, declaring that

“to help you fight these tough conditions caused by the Coronavirus outbreak, we have reduced the price of our services by up to 50 percent—grab the offer now!”

That website proudly boasts of offering services in 21 university towns or cities in the UK, and this is the point: essay mills and their use are not an exception to the rule; essay mills are becoming normalised.

This point was underlined in several Zoom conversations I have had in preparation for the Bill after I put out my own call for evidence to *Research Fortnight*. I would like to put on record my thanks to the individuals who attended these seminars on behalf of the National Union of Students—Anglia Ruskin, Loughborough, UCLan and Worcester student unions—along with academics from the Universities of Coventry, Leeds, Northampton, Swansea, Kent and Loughborough, and organisations such as Jisc, the QAA, Prospects, Turnitin, the Scottish Funding Council and the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales.

I heard stories of students now being recruited on campus as influencers and being paid to leaflet student halls with fliers offering essay mill services. I heard tales of students being blackmailed by these companies after having paid for essays, with threats of being reported to their universities or employers, and stories of international students being targeted on Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp and encouraged to sign up to academic support services before they started university without even realising that what they were doing was wrong.

Time and again in this dark underworld of essay mills and the companies that seek to make a profit out of the insecurity and desperation of students, the common theme that emerged was of exploitation. There is the exploitation of students, particularly vulnerable students under pressure to do well in their studies, and students who are the first in the family to attend university, on whom the pressure to succeed is immense. There is the exploitation of international students away from home for the first time, not to mention the exploitation of graduates abroad, who in some of the poorest countries in the world are forced to work 12-hour shifts writing essays for \$1 an hour. There is also exploitation of graduates and students at home who are so desperate for extra money that they are selling their essays for £10, which in turn will be sold on for £300.

I wish to make it clear that my Bill would not seek to criminalise students themselves for using essay mills. Instead, I propose that universities need to look at new strategies for creating second chances and educating students about their mistakes, following the example of the courageous conversations programme at the University of New South Wales, which gives students the opportunity to own up to their mistakes before formal investigations begin.

Although we need to be tough on contract cheating, we must also be tough on the causes of contract cheating, which would not exist if there were not a market to exploit. Legislation to ban essay mills and their advertisement is long overdue. Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and, most recently, Ireland have already taken action to make essay mills illegal in their countries, and the Quality Assurance Agency has been in close contact with the countries that have banned essay mills to monitor the effect of the ban. The ban is already making a difference. In Australia, following legislation, the Edubirdie, EssayShark and Custom Writings websites,

[Chris Skidmore]

for instance, now all state “Our service is not available in your region”; yet, in contrast, they all still thrive in the UK.

I know that Lord Storey has already introduced the Higher Education Cheating Services Prohibition Bill in the other place, calling for similar measures to those that I am proposing, but I recognise that the Department for Education may have specific issues with the legal text of that Bill. What I hope to achieve today is to demonstrate that there is the support of both Houses for legislation against essay mills. Indeed, my Bill is supported by: Members from all the major political parties; the Chair of the Education Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon); the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for students, the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield); and two former Secretaries of State, including the former Education Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds).

I say to the Minister for Universities, my hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan), who is listening today, that I would welcome a meeting to discuss how to take forward these proposals and legislation together with the Members, students and academic experts I have assembled for this task, including Professor Michael Draper, who has helped to draft similar legislation for other countries that is now in operation. I have been grateful for the dedicated work of the professionals I have worked with. Indeed, I am grateful for the work of all those who are involved in stamping out contract cheating at universities and other education institutions, and I know that they stand ready to help the Department for Education to take forward legislation that is sorely needed.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Chris Skidmore, Aaron Bell, Ben Lake, Carol Monaghan, Alyn Smith, Paul Blomfield, Damian Hinds, Lloyd Russell-Moyle, Layla Moran, Jason McCartney, Robert Halfon and Greg Clark present the Bill.

Chris Skidmore accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 259).

Policing (England and Wales)

2.3 pm

The Minister for Crime and Policing (Kit Malthouse): I beg to move,

That the Police Grant Report (England and Wales) for 2021-22 (HC 1162), which was laid before this House on 4 February, be approved.

It is a great pleasure to follow our own version of Dorian Gray, and to announce to the House the final police funding settlement for 2021-22. Although I appreciate that it is not ideal that the House is debating this publication prior to the consideration by the Select Committee on Statutory Instruments, it is essential that suitable preparatory time is given to the relevant parties prior to implementation. This—coupled with the difficulty in securing suitable Floor of the House approval slots, and the February recess—has meant that, unfortunately, it has not proved possible to achieve pre-scrutiny on this occasion, and I am sorry about that. Nevertheless, public safety is an absolute priority for this Government, which is why we are backing the police with the resources and powers that they need to protect our communities.

The professionalism, bravery and commitment shown by officers during the coronavirus pandemic have been truly extraordinary. Across the country, police forces continue to work tirelessly, building understanding with the public to help to control the virus while also tackling crime. Despite all the challenges that we have faced in the last year, the police have been there to answer the call, and I express my immense gratitude for their contribution to this unprecedented national effort. I also wish to place on record that my thoughts and condolences are with those who have lost loved ones, and with our brave police officers and staff who have lost their lives to covid-19.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I congratulate the Minister on his remarks and on the work he does with the police. Is he as concerned as I am that during the pandemic, across the country but particularly in Northamptonshire, the number of police officers coughed on, spat at, or bitten, rose to 130 attacks between February and November last year, which was up from 110 attacks during the same period the year before? Is that not especially disgraceful, given that the pandemic has been raging through our country?

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend is right: it is a complete disgrace, and unfortunately during the pandemic we have seen a rise in the particularly unpleasant practice of spitting or coughing on police officers and claiming to have covid. Sadly, that comes off the back of a general rise in assaults on police and emergency workers. I confess that I do not know what goes through the twisted mind of somebody who would do such an unspeakable thing.

I hope my hon. Friend will join me in voting with enthusiasm when the Police Powers and Protections Bill comes forward, both for the police covenant, which is there to protect police officers and ensure we pay attention to their wellbeing and protection, and for the doubling of the sentences for assaults on emergency workers. He and I both stood on that as a promise in our 2019 manifesto. We need the penalties for such awful offences to be increased, to deter those who think about such unspeakable things, and to punish those who cross that appalling line.

I know that our police forces have the thanks and respect of this House, and the settlement demonstrates our ongoing commitment to tackling crime and delivering the safer communities that the law-abiding majority in this country rightly want. Last year, Parliament approved the funding settlement, which made an additional £1.1 billion available to the policing system. That made it the biggest increase in funding for the policing system since 2010. Included in that was an increase to Government grant funding of £700 million for the first 6,000 additional police officers as part of the uplift programme, a £90 million increase in funding for counter-terrorism policing, £247 million for local forces from the council tax precept, and an extra £126 million provided for national policing programmes and priorities.

Last year's settlement underlined the Government's determination to strengthen our police service and tackle crime across the whole country. Next year's settlement will also enable the police to continue on that trajectory. For 2021-22, the Government will invest up to £15.8 thousand million in the policing system, up by an additional £636 million compared with last year. Of that additional investment, the Government will make available an additional £450 million for police and crime commissioners in England and Wales to support the next wave of officer recruitment. That funding will enable PCCs to meet the necessary investment and ongoing support costs associated with the recruitment of 6,000 new officers by the end of financial year 2021-22.

I am delighted to say that forces are delivering on recruitment. As of 31 December, an extraordinary 6,620 additional officers have been recruited as part of the uplift programme, surpassing the programme's first-year recruitment three months ahead of schedule. That superb progress is testament to the hard work of forces and the brave men and women who signed up to join the police and keep our communities safe. We thank them all for their continued efforts, particularly those involved in the recruitment process.

To ensure the secure management and success of the uplift programme in the coming year, the Government will once again create a ring-fenced grant. Forces will be allocated a share of that £100 million in line with their funding formula allocation. They will be able to access that funding as they make further progress on their recruitment targets. As has been the case this year, that is intended to ensure that forces deliver a return for the substantial uplift in funding.

In 2021-22 we will take recruitment one step further. We are expanding the scope of the programme to include regional organised crime units, including the equivalent units in the Metropolitan and City of London police, and Counter Terrorism Policing. By strengthening officer numbers across capabilities we are sending a clear message to both policing and the public that we are committed to cutting crime in all its guises.

Police and crime commissioners have continued to request further flexibility around levels of police precept, to make additional funding available for their local priorities. The settlement empowers them, particularly in England, to raise council tax contributions for local policing by less than 30p a week for a typical band D household, or up to £15 a year. Local precept decisions should be carefully considered, with their impact on household budgets being an important factor. Many families face difficult circumstances as a result of the pandemic.

If all police and crime commissioners decide to maximise their flexibility, the result will be a further £288 million of additional funding for local policing. I reiterate that the level of the police precept is a local decision and elected PCCs will, I know, carefully consider what they are asking their local constituents to pay. Locally elected commissioners will need to decide how to use the flexibility appropriately, based on local policing needs, and will be held accountable for the delivery of a return on that public investment, not least in May this year.

PCCs will also benefit from the additional funding announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government—whose motions on local government finance will follow this one—as part of the local government finance settlement for local council tax support. This funding will enable councils to continue to reduce council tax bills for those least able to pay. Additionally, the Government will compensate local authorities for 75% of the irrecoverable losses in council tax income arising in 2021, and collection fund deficits accrued for 2021 will be repayable over the next three years, as opposed to one year.

Beyond the increases to the core grant and precept, I am pleased to announce £1.1 billion of funding to support national policing priorities. This includes £180 million for combating serious and organised crime, including drug trafficking and child sexual exploitation and abuse, and money to protect National Crime Agency funding. We are providing £39 million for national support of the police uplift programme, to continue its success, and we are investing £500 million in Home Office-led police technology programmes, which will replace outdated legacy IT systems and provide the police with the modern digital infrastructure and tools that they need to protect the public. In addition, we are investing £38.7 million to support forces with several national programmes and with digital policing priorities such as public contact, data analytics and agile working for police forces.

For next year, we are allocating £20 million to the safer streets fund, to build on the excellent work that is taking place this year to prevent acquisitive crime such as theft and burglary in the worst-affected areas. I hope, Madam Deputy Speaker, that your local police and crime commissioner will apply to that fund. The funding will enable police and crime commissioners and local authorities to invest in well-evidenced crime-prevention measures, such as CCTV and street lighting, in new areas throughout the country.

As I have said, public safety is a key priority. Funding for counter-terrorism policing will be maintained at more than £900 million for the coming year. In addition, £32 million will be made available for the development of the new CT operations centre, which will bring together partners from Counter Terrorism Policing, the intelligence agencies and the criminal justice system, co-ordinating their expertise, resource and intelligence in a state-of-the-art facility. This investment is critical to help to continue the vital work of counter-terrorism police officers throughout the whole country.

The settlement confirms significant investment in our police forces, and it is only right that we expect to see continued improvements in efficiency and productivity to demonstrate to the public that they are getting the most out of the increased funding. The Government therefore expect to see £120 million of efficiency savings

[Kit Malthouse]

delivered next year across the law enforcement sector. That expectation is reflected in the funding set out as part of the wider settlement.

We expect the savings to be delivered through improved procurement practices, including the delivery of £20 million of savings through the new BlueLight Commercial organisation, as well as through savings in other areas, such as estates, agile working and shared services. To ensure progress in those areas, the policing sector has worked closely with the Home Office to set up and support a new efficiency and productivity board. The board will improve the evidence base to date, identify opportunities for gains for this and future spending review periods, and monitor and support delivery gains.

This is the last settlement before the next spending review. We will continue to monitor the demands that face policing and the impact of additional officer recruitment on improving services to the public in responding to threats from terrorism, organised crime and serious violence. The Government recognise that things have changed significantly since the previous police funding settlement, one year ago. We understand that our police forces are playing a critical role in our response to the pandemic, and I once again express my immense gratitude—and, I am sure, yours, Madam Deputy Speaker—for their heroic effort. When it comes to law and order, we will always back the police to go after criminals and protect our communities and neighbourhoods. That is what the public rightly expect and that is what we are delivering this year and next.

2.14 pm

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I would like to begin by putting on record our continuing gratitude for the selfless service, bravery and professionalism shown by our police officers and police staff. This pandemic has been a powerful reminder—not, frankly, that one should have been needed—of the risks they take daily on our behalf. I say to the Minister that warm words are not enough. It is scant recognition for these officers and staff that they are rewarded for their efforts throughout the pandemic with a pay freeze.

I call on the Minister to work quickly with the Health Secretary to introduce concrete plans to make good on lukewarm commitments to prioritise frontline officers in the vaccine roll-out. We know that officers are not able to control who they come into contact with—they are unable to socially distance as they go about their duties—so it is vital that they are able to be vaccinated as soon as possible. Officers have made the ultimate sacrifice and died from covid while on service, so it is vital that we extend that protection as soon as possible.

Even before the pandemic, the risks and the pressures heaped on police officers have increased significantly over the past decade. Attacks on police officers have jumped by 50% over the past five years. That is, sadly, unsurprising when we have seen such steep increases in violence and violent crime on the streets and in homes across the country. Officers have been placed in an impossible position. This Government oversaw huge cuts to police officer and staff numbers. Between 2010 and 2019, police officer numbers fell by 21,000. At the same time, there have been huge cuts to the services that are vital to preventing crime in the first place—youth clubs, mental health services, local councils and probation.

The Home Secretary and other Ministers like to talk tough, but the reality is that they are soft on crime and soft on the causes of crime. [Interruption.] The results have been devastating for victims of crime right across the country. The Minister chuckles, but in fact, violent crime has risen in every single police force area. In 2019-20, violence as a proportion of all police recorded crime reached its highest level since comparable records began. The Home Office's own research has shown the link between cuts to police officer numbers and violent crime. It is good that the Government have finally woken up to the huge damage that their police cuts have done to public safety and started to replace some of the huge numbers of officers they have cut. However, it should not have taken the devastation that rising crime has caused to families and communities across the country to spark that action.

In terms of the new recruits promised, I call on the Government to do everything possible to improve diversity in recruitment. I know all Members will agree that joining the police is a noble calling, and it is vital that police services look like the communities they serve. That is one of the many lessons we need to learn from the powerful testimonies that so many black people have shared in the past nine months, and it is incumbent upon us to act. There are excellent examples of initiatives to try to improve diversity that it would be good to share across the country. Much more needs to be done to ensure that officers from black, Asian and minority ethnic communities rise through the policing ranks, and we must put in place better structures to enable greater community involvement in police training.

Looking more widely across the criminal justice landscape, I again call on Ministers to properly commit to fully implementing the recommendations in the Lammy review and other reviews that the Government have commissioned in recent years. It is vital that we all live up to the words uttered on building a more equal society.

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman very much for giving way. He suggests that the Government are giving warm words in their commitment to the police, which I wholly disagree with. The Mayor of London has kindly given an exemption from the congestion charge in London to emergency workers, but not to police officers and police staff. I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman might share his view on whether real prioritisation of the police is something that the Labour party supports.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: It is nice actually to take an intervention. That is not something we can do regularly in House debates at the moment, but on the point raised by the hon. Gentleman in his attempt to criticise the Mayor of London, I have to say that the Mayor of London has been taking action on violent crime. The rise in violent crime is right across the country. In terms of prioritising police officers for the vaccine, that is precisely the case I am putting to the Government. They have been saying warm words about that, too, and I am asking them to make good on those warm words that I know they have been uttering to police representatives for some time. We would all agree about the dangers that police officers put themselves in every day, which is why I am asking for this action to take place.

Moving back to the funding of the commitment on police recruitment, as ever with this Government, the devil is in the detail, and the policing grant is no different. I point out, first, that when the Prime Minister pledged to increase the number of police officers, he did not make it clear to voters that a significant proportion of it would rely on increasing the council tax precept by £15 a year, at a time when family finances are very hard-pressed. In his opening remarks, the Minister described it as flexibility; I would describe it as a Government who are not putting the needs of families first.

Will the Minister explain why the Government have decided to slow the speed of police recruitment so sharply? He will be aware that police forces across the country were planning for 6,000 officers to be recruited in year 1, 8,000 in year 2, and 6,000 in year 3. However, we now know that there will be 6,000 officers recruited this year and presumably 8,000 in year 3. What is the reason for this worrying slowdown, which will mean thousands fewer officers on our streets?

Also, it will not have escaped attention that there is a sharp decline in the amount of funding that the Government have allocated to recruiting the promised officers for this year. When a target of 6,000 officers was set for 2020-21, the amount of money allocated was £750 million, but for 2021-22 the amount for the same number of officers—6,000—has been sharply reduced to £400 million. The Minister may say that that is in part due to so-called front-loading of costs for additional officers.

Kit Malthouse *indicated assent.*

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Indeed, the Minister confirms that is what he would say. However, we know that in fact police forces have been incredibly stretched. Even with the promises of additional officers, there are huge budget pressures elsewhere, and that is why many forces have had to freeze police staff recruitment.

Since 2010, there has been a fall of more than 13% in police staff numbers. Police staff across the board, as I am sure the Minister would agree, play a vital role in keeping communities safe, through key roles such as answering emergency calls from the public, staffing our custody suites, crime analysis and crime scene investigations. That fall also includes the loss of PCSOs, who played and play such a vital role in neighbourhood policing.

Undermining all those functions makes our communities less safe and keeps police officers behind desks and away from the streets where we want them to be. It is little wonder that the number of police officers in frontline roles fell by 16% between 2010 and 2019. These funding pressures are likely to be even more keenly felt when the required £120 million of efficiency savings outlined in the provisional police grant report in December—indeed, they were repeated by the Minister from the Dispatch Box today—come to pass.

The fact that our brave officers have been forced to work with reduced numbers of colleagues and with a pay freeze is particularly galling when such huge sums of money are being wasted on Government inefficiencies. That is why the answer given to the shadow policing and fire Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones), at Home Office questions was so revealing. So poor, frankly, is Conservative management at the Home Office that delays to the

emergency services network mean that police forces will have to spend an extra £600 million—bringing the total to £1.5 billion—to replace the old radios, while they wait even longer for new equipment.

Perhaps we should not be surprised at the Home Office's complacent attitude to serious errors or the impact that they can have. Members will have seen the deeply worrying statements and the lack of grip at the Home Office over the catastrophic loss of police data. It is a confused picture that has seen Ministers contradicted by the National Police Chiefs' Council's letter and now an independent review having to be held to get to the bottom of what went wrong. One thing is clear: thousands of police records have been deleted and criminals will, in all likelihood, go free as a result of this fiasco. Frankly, more effective Home Secretaries than this one have gone for lesser mistakes on their watch. These errors are not isolated incidents. They are part of a picture of Ministers who have lost their grip on vital issues of national security. We have seen it in the failures on quarantine, the rises in violent crime, and the failure to get a grip of the data deletion, and too often we fail to see the Home Secretary taking charge of these issues and delivering results.

Today, we welcome the fact that Members across the House now all agree that it is vital to at least start to fill the hole created by the Conservative cuts to policing since 2010. None the less, there remain a number of worrying aspects, including the huge general financial pressures for the police; officers being forced off the streets to backfill for police staff; and the slowing down of police recruitment. We will judge the Government by their actions on this, as people are fed up with empty promises. Although we welcome the new police officers and staff joining the ranks, and we thank them for their service, we will continue to campaign for them to have the support they need to keep us all safe.

2.26 pm

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I rise to support the motion on the Order Paper and to thank the Government for the extra money going into local policing. I thank the Minister for his endeavours; he has been a superb Minister of State for Crime and Policing. I also wish to highlight the excellent work done by Chief Constable Nick Adderley in Northamptonshire, Chief Fire Officer Darren Dovey and our superb police, fire and crime commissioner, Stephen Mold and to thank all the police and fire officers in Northamptonshire for the superb work they do.

It is not enough to talk about how much extra money is going into policing this year. The important thing is to highlight what the police do with that money. I am pleased that, as a result of the funding that has been announced, there are 57 new officers so far in Northamptonshire, taking the total police headcount to 1,300, sending us well on our way to our ultimate target of about 1,500 in 2023. It is worth reminding residents in Northamptonshire that they pay on average, on a band D council tax, £5 a week for their policing. In return for a fiver a week, they get a tremendous range of police resources.

Madam Deputy Speaker, with your permission, I will concentrate on four particular issues that affect Northamptonshire: first, county lines drug gangs; secondly, automatic number plate recognition technology; thirdly, assaults on police officers; and fourthly, Tasers.

[*Mr Philip Hollobone*]

Northamptonshire police should be congratulated on the efforts they have undertaken—over the past two years especially—in busting county lines drug gangs. It was only last week that the national press reported that Northamptonshire was responsible for the biggest ever takedown of a UK narcotics network when, as a result of an extensive investigation over a long period of time, it managed ultimately to jail 72 gangsters who had been described as untouchable, with a total sentencing of 220 years. As a result of this drugs bust, 18 county lines and 12 local drug lines were busted and £1.3 million of drugs taken from our streets. Disgracefully, Northamptonshire police found these gangs exploiting vulnerable children as young as 14 to sell crack cocaine and heroin on local streets. The four big players of the operation were jailed for a total of 36 years for conspiracy to supply drugs.

It is an immense source of pride for Northamptonshire police that they should be responsible for this biggest ever county lines bust and I congratulate Chief Constable Adderley on the operation. It began at the beginning of 2019 and involved investigations in the east midlands, the west midlands, London and elsewhere. In fact, contacts were in London, Birmingham, Wolverhampton and Northampton. Warrants were made for multiple arrests at the end of 2019, taking that amount of drugs off our streets.

It is an immense source of pride for the local force that it is the biggest conviction of its kind by a single UK police force to date. I can do no better than quote Detective Chief Inspector Adam Pendlebury of Northamptonshire police, who said that drug dealers like these “truly think they are untouchable.

They exploit vulnerable people like children and adults suffering with addiction, and make them take all the risks, while they sit at home counting their money. There is no honour in this.

Over the past two years we have warned them and their associates directly that one day, we would get them, one day we would come through their door, and one day they would be looking at the inside of a prison cell.

Today is that day and I could not be prouder of the exceptional work that has gone into this investigation by a group of detectives, uniformed officers and experienced criminal analysts, who have made this operation their lives for the past two years.”

For breaking the biggest ever narcotics operation, Northamptonshire police deserves the praise of the whole House.

I now wish to move on to automatic number plate recognition technology, which I think we should be doing far more about across the country. The good news in Northamptonshire is that work is beginning to install 150 new ANPR cameras, which will more than double the size of the network in Northamptonshire. They will increase coverage across rural areas, as well as in the larger towns and on the county borders. That is a £1.3 million investment in ANPR technology by Northamptonshire police. Importantly, if used appropriately and on a wide scale, it can deny criminals the use of our roads. Most crime has a vehicle involved in it at some point. Criminals use vehicles to get around the country, and if their vehicles can be spotted and intercepted, crime can be reduced.

The new camera sites were chosen following analysis of where they will be most effective in supporting the investigation of crime, and have been subject to public consultation. For Members who do not know, ANPR

reads the registration of passing vehicles and checks it across several databases, raising the alert if a vehicle is stolen, linked to crime or uninsured. I have had the privilege to sit in a Northamptonshire police vehicle and see ANPR in action. When a suspect vehicle goes past, a ping goes off in the police vehicle. They can quickly check the police national database, and with their new interceptor vehicles they can set off in pursuit. I think that the success of Northamptonshire police in focusing resources on that issue should be rolled out across the country. If we can deny criminals the use of our roads, we will see the footprint of crime reduce.

I now wish to turn to the very grave issue of assaults, which I raised at the beginning of the debate in an intervention to the Minister. In Northamptonshire over the past year, 609 officers out of a force of 1,300 were assaulted, which included being headbutted, being punched and kicked in the face, being attacked with weapons, having boiling water thrown at them, and being hit by cars. As Chief Constable Adderley said,

“This list is distressing and disturbing.”

In November, two police officers were injured, one needing surgery, after boiling water was poured over them during a shocking incident in Northampton. One officer suffered second degree burns, which meant that he required plastic surgery, and his colleague received minor injuries to his hands. Both had to be taken to hospital. A 15-year-old girl was arrested at the scene and charged with grievous bodily harm and assaulting an emergency worker. Despite boiling water having been thrown over the officers, in December the 15-year-old girl got community service and a token £250 fine. We have passed legislation in this House to increase the sentencing for assaults on emergency workers. It seems, however, that some of the courts are simply not listening.

In another case, in October 2019, paramedics were trying to treat a 22-year-old in Kettering when he had a head injury but was refusing treatment. Police were called to assist by East Midlands Ambulance Service, but when the officers arrived, he kicked out at the female officer, bending her knee sideways. It left her with pain, weakness and mobility issues, added to the emotional toll of being assaulted at work. He was sentenced in February this year to rehabilitation activities, unpaid work in the community and a fine of £300. A Northamptonshire police spokesman said:

“Assaults against our officers are disgraceful and we will always pursue action against those who commit them. Being assaulted is not part of the job and never will be. Our officers go to work to protect the public and do not deserve to be assaulted in the line of duty.”

We have passed legislation in this House for those who assault police officers to go to jail. If a judge had boiling water poured over him or her, I very much doubt that the offender would be let off with community service and a £300 fine. If a magistrate had their knee kicked sideways so that they were unable to walk properly, I very much doubt that the offender would avoid a custodial sentence. So in his role in the Justice Department, will the Minister emphasise to those who issue these sentences that anyone who assaults a police officer should go to jail?

I support the calls of John Apter, the national chair of the Police Federation of England and Wales, who has said that attacks on police officers during the pandemic are “a serious issue for us all”.

He went on to say:

“Those who attack emergency workers have a complete lack of respect for anything or anybody. Without doubt, we are living in a more violent society which needs to take a long hard look at itself. We need officers to have the very best protection, and there must be a strong deterrent—that deterrent should be time in prison, no ifs, no buts. Time and time again we see officers who have been badly assaulted, and they see their attacker being let off with little more than just a slap on the wrist. This is offensive and fails to give that deterrent which is so desperately needed.”

Overall, attacks against police officers in Northamptonshire have increased, with 507 recorded from February to November last year, up from 440 in the same period in 2019. As I said, in the year as a whole, 609 officers have been assaulted.

Finally, I wish to draw the Minister’s attention to the roll-out of Tasers in Northamptonshire. Because police officers are not being properly protected by the courts, and because there is not a sufficient deterrent for people not to assault police officers, Chief Constable Nick Adderley has made the brave decision to roll out Tasers to any frontline officer who chooses to use them. This makes Northamptonshire the first police force in the whole country to arm all its frontline officers with Tasers, if that is what they wish to do. The move means that over 300 officers have the option to be trained and equipped with Tasers, and the latest numbers show that 328 officers locally routinely carry Tasers.

Chief Constable Adderley says:

“Enough is enough. Every week, I am made aware of more and more sickening attacks on my officers—they are spat at, assaulted on a daily basis, and are being exposed to increasing levels of violence when they are deployed to incidents.

No-one comes to work to be assaulted and I want to make it crystal clear that my officers certainly don’t. It’s time to give all frontline officers the ability to defend themselves and defend members of the public, which involves equipping them with more than a baton, handcuffs and a can of pepper spray.”

Some people may think that if officers are armed with Tasers, Tasers are being deployed too often and the barbs that come out of them are regularly being fired. That is not how Tasers work in the vast majority of cases. Home Office figures show that Tasers were used in just over 17,000 incidents across the country in the year to March 2018—the Minister will have more up-to-date figures than I do—and that was up from 11,500 the year before. However, in 85% of cases where a Taser is deployed—where an officer takes the Taser out of its holster and points it at the suspect—it is not discharged. That is because when an officer draws, aims and places the Taser red dot on the suspect, and the suspect can see the red dot on their chest, their arm or their leg, the weapon is officially used but not actually discharged. All too often, the red dot is enough to quell the threat, meaning that the officer rarely has to discharge the weapon.

I believe, as the chief constable does, that Taser works. Just last week, according to the chief constable, a police officer used a Taser locally in Northamptonshire to stop a man strangling a colleague and saved that colleague’s life. Two weekends ago, a Northamptonshire officer was forced to the ground and strangled to the point where he nearly lost consciousness. Due to the size of the offender, strikes proved ineffective. PAVA spray was also ineffective. Thank goodness, the officer’s colleague had a Taser, which saved the officer’s life. The man who was assaulting the officer was heavily intoxicated. When the officers tried to arrest him, he set upon them and pinned one of them to the ground. He was a large

individual and was strangling the officer to the point that the accompanying officer could not get him off his colleague. The only thing that prevented the officer from being more seriously injured or potentially killed was the discharge of the Taser.

Can we have more county lines drugs busts? Can we have more ANPR technology? Can we have a wider roll-out of Tasers? And can we have fewer assaults on police officers?

2.42 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab) [V]: I would like to begin by paying tribute to the officers, community support staff and other staff at Merseyside Police, and to police forces across the country, for all the work they have been doing to help keep our communities safe. The past year has been particularly challenging, and we owe them a huge debt of gratitude. I would also like to express my condolences to the families and friends of those officers who have lost their lives to covid.

A decade of Conservative Government austerity policies has had a damaging effect on police forces up and down the country. There are almost 24,000 fewer people working in the police now than in 2010—that is around 9,000 fewer police officers, 7,000 fewer police staff and 7,000 fewer police community support officers. The service cannot deal with these levels of cuts without there being an impact on public safety and on the stress levels of the remaining police workforce. That has to be a concern for us all.

Ministers will point to repeated statements about plans to recruit an additional 20,000 police officers as cause for celebration. However, the Government’s increase in police numbers will happen only over several years. In the meantime, our overstretched police officers are having to make up for 10 years of Conservative Government austerity.

In Wirral West, we have felt the impact of Government austerity. A decade of budget cuts by central Government reduced the number of officers in Merseyside Police by nearly a quarter. In 2010, Merseyside Police had over 4,500 police officers, but then, because of Government cuts, they lost over 1,100 of those officers. Those figures are breathtaking and have impacted on the safety of our communities.

Now, numbers in Merseyside are increasing, and by the end of March next year the force will have more than 4,000 officers, but that will still fall short of the numbers we had in 2010 and the Government have not announced any plans to replace the PCSOs or the police staff who have been cut. So, when the Prime Minister says,

“The most important thing politicians can do is back the police”, does he really mean it? Why, then, is he freezing police pay?

The chair of the National Police Chiefs’ Council has spoken out about how

“sustained pay restraint can have wider impacts on the wellbeing of officers and staff, who work so hard to protect the public.”

Freezing pay is no way to value hard-working public sector workers, nor is it any way to build a service, and there is concern that the retention of police officers could become an issue.

According to the Minister for Crime and Policing, “The retention of experienced police officers is a priority”,

[Margaret Greenwood]

and yet the Government are freezing their pay. How can it be right that the Government are freezing the pay of police officers and staff at a time when they have made such a vital contribution to public safety throughout the course of the pandemic? Will the Minister think again and press the Chancellor to make sure that the police receive the pay rise they deserve?

This year police and crime commissioners have had to take very difficult decisions at local level. The Merseyside commissioner proposed an increase to the police precept, the part of council tax ring-fenced for local policing. The increase to the police precept equates to £10 a year on a band A property—the lowest council tax band but the one paid by the majority of households on Merseyside. It is no secret that there is growing reluctance from police and crime panels to continue to support raising precepts in this way. Indeed, while endorsing the commissioner's budget plans, the police and crime panel on Merseyside also recommended that she strenuously raise their concerns with Home Office and Treasury Ministers and challenge Government decisions to shift the burden of paying for the police from central taxation on to the shoulders of local council tax payers.

That the Government expect council tax payers to pay more to help towards the cost of policing shows that they have totally failed to understand the devastating impact of their austerity policies on people up and down the country. At a time when we are seeing a huge increase in the number of people using food banks, this increase in council tax will hit those families who are already worried about keeping up with their bills and putting food on the table. It is a fundamental responsibility of Government to keep citizens safe, and along with that comes Government responsibility to ensure that the police are properly resourced.

To conclude, I would like to ask some questions of the Minister. How long will it take for police officer numbers in Merseyside to reach 2010 levels? Have the Government any plans to replace the police staff and PCSO roles that have been cut since 2010? And what steps will he take to repair the damage that this Government have done to policing since 2010?

2.47 pm

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con) [V]: I thank the police for all they do, in particular the way in which they have policed the pandemic in this very challenging time. I thank the Government for their investment in the police force and, in particular, their commitment to increase the number of officers, which has meant nearly 300 additional officers in Devon and Cornwall so far, on top of the local growth numbers funded by our council tax payers. I understand that this additional resource has helped morale in our local force, which is incredibly important to our communities.

In my own police area, our excellent police and crime commissioner, Alison Hernandez, piloted an allowance for our hard-working special constables, who did a set amount of hours over the winter months. Will the Department work with her and the chief constable, look at that pilot and explore options to enable police forces to develop a special constabulary as a paid reserve, in the same way as Army reserves provide additional resources at times of need? This could be particularly

useful to Cornwall when we have peak needs, as we do in the summer, when we will, I hope, again have an influx of tourists.

My second request is for the force to be able to do home-based lateral flow Covid testing of officers. It is essential that officers, who work shifts and often come into close contact with people through their job, have the ability to test close at hand. I ask the Department to look at that as a matter of urgency.

2.49 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I should declare an interest in that my partner works for a local police force.

I, like other hon. Members, begin by paying tribute to the often unsung, much unseen and extraordinary work of our police throughout the pandemic. It goes without saying that the bravery and dedication of officers in my local force, and other forces throughout the country—my local force, and the local force of my hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), the shadow Home Secretary, is Gwent police—is in evidence 24/7, 365 days a year, even in normal times.

However, the new challenges of the pandemic have only put additional strain on the frontline. The option of staying at home to keep safe was never a possibility for frontline officers, who have continued to put themselves in harm's way to protect and serve the public. All forces have had to deal with staff shortages as a result of the pandemic, and police officers, who so often have to enter homes and non-socially distanced spaces, as well as dealing with disgraceful assaults, including spitting, are still waiting to receive a vaccine. The hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) made an important point about the impact of assaults.

Despite all this, that deeply ingrained, selfless commitment to keeping us all safe has never wavered. On behalf of my constituents, I want to convey heartfelt thanks to all our police officers and staff. We value you and we support you.

It is important to re-emphasise the context of the Government cuts that loom large over today's debate on police spending. Between 2010 and 2020, 21,000 police officers were cut, as were 16,000 police staff and over 6,000 PCSOs. Gwent police saw its budget reduced by over 40% over the course of the decade, leading to a loss of 350 frontline officers and 200 members of staff.

Today, the police workforce has nearly 24,000 fewer personnel than in 2010, and it is important to point out that the loss of PCSOs in Wales was only offset by the Welsh Labour Government, who of course have no jurisdiction over policing, stepping in to fund 500 PCSOs when the UK Government cuts came into effect, and we thank them for that.

Although the introduction of the police officer uplift programme was a belated recognition from Ministers of the impact of their cuts, the scheme goes nowhere near far enough to address the damage caused by a decade of ideological austerity that undermined our police forces. The police grant for 2021-22 promises an increase of £636 million on last year's settlement. However, analysis reveals that there is a £2.2 billion real-terms gap in the central Government funding formula grant and a £1.6 billion real-terms gap in overall funding compared with 2010-11.

The 2021-22 provisional settlement does not remedy the past disinvestment in policing, nor does it fully address existing and future pressures, such as pay awards for existing police officers and staff or increases in things such as national ICT costs from the Home Office. Even after taking account of rises in central Government revenue grant funding over the 2020 to 2022 financial years to deliver the uplift programme, the overall cash reduction in central Government revenue grant funding across England and Wales stands at around 12%. When the effect of inflation and pay awards is built in, the real reduction is actually around 25% over the past 12 years.

During that time, policing demand has become considerably more complex and labour-intensive, with the challenges of cyber-crime and new outlets for serious and organised crime. Officers, having so often become the service of first resort in protecting the most vulnerable in society, feel that, too.

Despite these enormous pressures, Gwent maintained one of the highest spends on neighbourhood policing of any police force in the country. The force began recruiting again as soon as it could, and it has continued to add new officers to the ranks. That may not have been possible if our local police and crime commissioner, Jeff Cuthbert, had not stepped in and made the difficult decision to increase the policing precept for local residents. On current financial forecasts, by 2024-25 council tax payers in Gwent will fund over half of the net budget of Gwent police, thereby becoming the majority stakeholders. Is this the Government's strategic funding direction for policing? Local PCCs should not have to plug the gap of Home Office failings.

Furthermore, the precept increases alone have not been able to keep pace with the unavoidable expenditure increases each year. As a result, in the past 11 years, Gwent police have been forced to deliver savings. Even with the £4.2 million extra funding from Government for the police officer uplift programme, Gwent police will still need to deliver further budget savings as they look to address a funding deficit that could rise to £3.5 million by 2026. All forces will face a similar or even more daunting outlook. The fact that police forces are still grappling with this painful balancing act shows that central Government are still not meeting the challenge of properly resourcing our police.

Another example of this failure is the woefully inadequate Home Office capital grant. Gwent's capital grant from the Home Office will be £120,000. When we consider that spending on the fleet replacement programme alone amounts to £1.4 million and the total capital programme, including estate and information and communications technology upgrades, amounts to £18.7 million, the grant looks all the more paltry. This of course means increased pressure on both revenue budgets and reserve funds.

Then there is the issue of pensions. Following the re-evaluation of public sector pension schemes in 2016, Gwent police's specific pension grant from the Home Office remains flat at 2019-20 levels. This results in a £1.7 million shortfall for the next financial year, as the pension liability has increased in the intervening years while Government spending has not.

As many have said, the work of the police is often unsung, but this should not mean that our police are undervalued too. We really need to see a long-term strategy on funding that addresses the current and evolving challenges that our police face. Otherwise there

is a real risk that this year's police grant will just be another short-term sticking plaster over the wound of a decade of swingeing cuts. I do not doubt that Ministers value and support the work of our police, as we all do across this House, but warm words can only go so far. Our police have had a raw deal for too long and deserve better than they are getting from the Government.

2.56 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con) [V]: I would like to begin by thanking Bedfordshire police officers and staff for the magnificent job they do in keeping my constituents safe. I also register my disgust at those people who spit and cough over police officers, or indeed attack or try to harm them in any way.

Keeping the public safe is the highest duty of any Government. When I was first elected to Parliament in 2001, I campaigned on a platform to restore the 88 police officers who had recently been lost from the force. In 2005, I stood on a platform of recruiting an extra 5,000 police officers. Only just over a year ago, this Government were elected on a pledge to recruit 20,000 more officers, and we are making good progress on that target, with Bedfordshire having already received an additional 54 officers from that funding, and now having more officers than ever before, at 1,257. Back in 2017-18, Bedfordshire police had a budget of £102.2 million. For 2021-22, it will be £127.4 million—an increase of 25% during a four-year period. It would therefore be wrong for me not to recognise that significant uplift and thank the Government for it.

Over this five-year period, the force has made savings of £13.5 million, showing that we have also focused on efficiency and value for money. However, if we examine the budget more carefully from 1 April 2018 to the end of next month, it will be seen that the £0.4 million underspend in 2018, the £1 million underspend in 2019 and the break-even financial position for this financial year were only achieved as a result of additional special grants for the guns and gangs team of £4.4 million, £3 million and a further £3 million respectively. In other words, without those additional special grants, the force would have been £9 million overspent in the past three financial years. This is not sustainable. Indeed, anything that cannot be done for the long term is not sustainable. Those special grants cannot be relied on in the way that core funding can. What happens if they are suddenly withdrawn? That is not a secure and prudent basis on which to employ police officers.

The problems with Bedfordshire police's budget go back to 2004, when damping was brought in. That meant that a number of police forces, including Bedfordshire, did not receive the full amount of funding that the national police funding formula said they should. In Bedfordshire's case, the shortfall was around £3 million a year, which was the equivalent of employing around 95 police officers. It is not an accident that of the five Bedfordshire Members of Parliament who could speak in this debate, three are doing so. We have always worked in a cross-party way on this for the good of the whole county, and I have met every police Minister to raise this issue since I was first elected in 2001.

Bedfordshire police is the best-represented police force in this debate because of the severity and profile of crime across Bedfordshire. If a school had a 25% increase in funding over four years, we might think that was a very good result. If the number of children in the

[Andrew Selous]

school increased by 50%, however, we might take a different view. Budgets must be looked at in relation to what they have to be used for. Let me spell out the severity and profile of crime in Bedfordshire. Bedfordshire police manages more organised criminal groups than Norfolk and Suffolk combined. It manages 12 organised criminal groups involved with firearms, which is more than Norfolk, Suffolk, Kent and Hertfordshire combined. The police force also manages 18 identified county lines, and it ranks fourth nationally in relation to county lines, surpassed only by the Metropolitan police, West Midlands police and Greater Manchester police, in that order. In proportion to its population, Bedfordshire police force is not funded in anything like the same way as those three police forces. The issue of county lines in Bedfordshire concerns residents in the areas covered by the Metropolitan police, West Midlands police, Greater Manchester police and even Avon and Somerset police, because Bedfordshire supplies drugs to all those areas. Overall, the supply of drugs out of the county is the fourth highest in England and Wales.

All that was true before the infiltration of the EncroChat server by European law enforcement agencies in Operation Venetic. Bedfordshire police have been allocated 26 separate packages of intelligence about criminality through Operation Venetic. That compares with only 11 packages for Hertfordshire—a police force area three times the size of Bedfordshire—and no packages at all for Cambridgeshire, a county with roughly the same population as Bedfordshire. It is absolutely right that Bedfordshire police should devote resources to tackling crime that is uncovered through that intelligence, but doing so is not cheap and it comes at a significant cost in police officers and budget. That has led to a lack of resilience within Bedfordshire police, and it places the force in a difficult position. I note with great concern, for example, that one recent investigation undertaken by the child and vulnerable adult abuse team took three years to reach a successful conclusion. The result was, of course, a good one, but the conclusion could have been reached within a year. The 11 vulnerable survivors were therefore exposed to horrific crimes for two years longer than should have been the case.

The impact of all that in Bedfordshire is that our police resources get concentrated on our two largest urban centres. That dates back to a change made in October 2012, a month before the very first police and crime commissioner election, and it means that there is not an even distribution of police officers across the whole county. Understandably, the chief constable will place his resource where it is most needed, but that leaves many areas of the county with significantly less police presence than they used to have—and less than people have a right to expect, given that they pay increasing taxes and police precept for police presence in their area.

Let me illustrate that by looking at the police establishment that my largest town, Leighton Buzzard, had in 1988. Back then the town had its own police station, with 12 civilian staff, one inspector, six sergeants and 27 constables. That is a total of 34 warranted officers based in the town. There was also a 24/7 first responder presence, which is something that I want to see in all three of my towns. Other police forces in towns of a similar size with similar budgets do manage to achieve this, but they are not dealing with the crime profile in Bedfordshire.

Today, Leighton Buzzard and Linslade have eight police constables and three PCSOs operating out of the shared services site. There is also a reduced police presence in Dunstable and Houghton Regis. Many years ago, the villages in my constituency had police officers living in police houses. That has all gone, and some residents in my villages live in fear that the police will not be able to get to them in time. This has had very serious consequences indeed for some of my constituents and for a number of local businesses. There have been major incidents of modern slavery on some local Traveller sites, and 100 officers from two neighbouring forces, in addition to Bedfordshire, were required to police one Traveller funeral. That is a great deal of police resource that is not available to the rest of the county to undertake covid-19 enforcement and to respond to all manner of crime. There has also been a very large police presence at at least three other Traveller funerals.

Although we are grateful for the increased budgets and the increasing number of police officers, the resources need to be equal to the challenges they face. The Government need to be fair about the challenges facing Bedfordshire police. My constituents expect no less. Successive Governments of all political parties have continually failed to recognise the challenges facing Bedfordshire. That needs to change and it needs to do so on a sustainable basis, so that the force can plan for the long term based on its core budget and does not have to hope that it will continue to receive one-off special grants, which are not a sustainable basis to plan for the long term. The Minister said in his opening remarks that he would continue to monitor the demands on police forces. That monitoring needs to be improved, and to lead to action and change as far as Bedfordshire is concerned.

3.7 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab) [V]: While crime has risen across the country, it has risen every single year since the Warwickshire police and crime commissioner was elected. Since 2015, crime has risen by 45% in Warwickshire. Furthermore, victim satisfaction has gone down. I am afraid to say that this is now a Government of crime and disorder. Nationally in 2019-20, violence as a proportion of all crime recorded by the police reached its highest level since comparative records began. At the same time, violence against the person has increased in every police force across the country. More specifically, offences involving a knife have increased in every police force in England and Wales. There was a 10% increase in the total number of domestic abuse offences recorded by the police in the year ending September 2020 compared with the previous year. Most depressingly of all, only one in 14 crimes leads to a charge.

As the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) said, the national statistics are reflected in counties such as Warwickshire and Northamptonshire, and particularly locally in my constituency of Warwick and Leamington, where communities are alarmed by the shocking rise in violent crime. Knife crime is often spoken of as a metropolitan or city issue, but it is clear that towns across the UK are impacted, in particular due to county lines drug gangs. Towns such as Bedworth, Leamington, Nuneaton and Rugby have all been victim, with our residents on the frontline watching as knife crime has quadrupled across Warwickshire since 2013-14. In Leamington alone we have had at least five stabbing

incidents in just over a year, with the latest on 16 January when a 15-year-old boy had a substance thrown in his face and was stabbed after refusing to hand over his mobile phone.

It would be easy to say that we simply need more officers, but we need more specialist staff, too. One should not be substituted for the other. When it comes to domestic abuse, there were 1,628 arrests for domestic abuse-related crimes across Warwickshire between 1 April and 30 June 2020. In fact, a staggering 15% of all recorded crime here is now domestic abuse-related, so why is it such a low priority for the police and crime commissioner of Warwickshire and, indeed, for the Government?

The Government have made much of their claim that they are putting more police on the streets, but in truth it is nonsense. They are putting police on the streets but withdrawing and sacking officers and staff working behind the scenes who are just as valuable as our frontline officers.

The police grant report confirms fears that the funding allocated for promised additional officers is far lower than last year, falling by £285 million throughout the UK from last year. This will put huge strain on police finances, meaning fewer police staff and PCSOs and therefore fewer officers on the beat—unless something gives. By the year ending March 2018, more than 21,000 officers had been lost, taking their numbers to the lowest level since 1988. There are still more than 9,000 fewer officers today than in 2010. Rather than properly fund the police, Ministers have chosen to heap the burden on hard-pressed homeowners—local taxpayers—by raising the precept to £15 for band D properties.

Unlike the Conservatives, Labour's record in government shows that we can be trusted on policing and crime. Let us remember that by 2010 crime was down by more than a third compared with 1997, with 6 million fewer crimes each year and the risk of being a victim of crime at its lowest since the crime survey began in 1981. Police numbers had reached record levels, up by almost 17,000 since 1997, and Labour invested in safety and security in our communities, with the addition of 16,000 police community support officers.

Let me turn to the picture locally and the cuts to Warwickshire police. Since 2010, we have seen a real-terms funding cut of 2%—a cut of £2.4 million—resulting in a decade of rising and more violent crime. The Conservative police and crime commissioner has hiked the precept, which is often confused with council tax, every year since he was elected except one, when he kept it the same. He proposes a precept increase for a band D property of a further £15, or 6.3%, in 2021-22. That follows a 5% to 6% increase every year for the past few years. Council tax band D properties in Warwickshire are being charged almost £50 more annually for policing than when the police and crime commissioner was elected in 2016, resulting in local people paying more but getting less.

Most disturbing have been the cuts to Warwickshire's domestic abuse unit, to which I alluded earlier. The police and crime commissioner plans to replace all nine staff, with some 70 years' experience in police service between them, with new police constables. More than half the people in Warwickshire police custody over Christmas were arrested for domestic abuse. A petition against the cuts, organised by local residents, has gained more than 1,000 signatures.

After Warwickshire police announced the redundancies to backroom staff, I contacted Unison, which told me that around 125 posts previously occupied by members of police staff have been redesignated as police officer posts. Police staff doing those roles freed up police officers to get out on the streets—that was the great value of how it worked—where the public can see them and be reassured by their presence, rather than them being sat behind their desks in offices. The decision to put these police officers into offices and to make the staff redundant is more expensive and a questionable use of public money.

In all, Warwickshire police is losing 87 hard-working employees of the force in the middle of a pandemic, yet the police and crime commissioner is claiming that an uplift of 40 police officers will offset that. The public know they are being duped—they know they are paying more for less. It is not often in life that people are prepared to pay more for less and be content. The public of Warwickshire are not happy. They demand greater security and greater safety, and they demand better.

3.15 pm

Matt Vickers (Stockton South) (Con): Cleveland has some of the most hard-working, incredible, determined, committed police officers in the country. They go above and beyond day in, day out. I therefore welcome the fact that we will have one of the highest settlements per head of population in the country—in fact, second only to the Met—but it will not stop me asking for more.

Cleveland is the holder of two very grim national awards. It is devastating to know that we need this money, and we need more. A person is more likely to be a victim of crime in Cleveland than anywhere else in this country. Ours was the first police force in the country to be put into special measures after failing on every measure of performance and being deemed inadequate. While Cleveland's incredible frontline police officers put themselves in harm's way day in, day out, serving our community with distinction, our force has been let down by Labour's political leadership. A Labour-controlled police authority and then a Labour police and crime commissioner have seen our force stumble from one scandal to another for decades.

Since 2011, we have had seven different chief constables. One left while being investigated for gross misconduct. Another was dismissed for it. The force was found to be institutionally racist. It was found to have illegally used surveillance powers to tap the phones of journalists and a whistleblower. There were questions of negligence around an investigation into an officer who was found to be a serial rapist. We had a Labour PCC who appeared to be more interested in employing press officers than police officers. He resigned last year amid questions around his conduct. Our residents deserve better. Our brave frontline police officers deserve better.

I am delighted that we have a new acting police and crime commissioner and a determined, committed new chief constable. We are turning a corner and leaving this dark history behind us. In May, people can choose to return our force to Labour's grubby little hands or elect Steve Turner as the PCC, restoring confidence in our force, putting more police on our streets and taking the fight to Cleveland's criminals. Legacy issues continue to eat into resource and focus, adding pressure to our ongoing movement with Cleveland police. I hope that

[*Matt Vickers*]

the Minister will meet me and the chief constable to look at how we can wipe the slate clean, end the discussions and debates about the history of Cleveland police and deal with the legal services and HR issues.

The Government get the challenges facing the police and our country, delivering 20,000 more police officers on to our streets with better equipment and stronger powers to stop and search, and a renewed, tougher approach to sentencing. That already means 159 more police officers on Cleveland's streets. In Stockton, that resource has been used to set up a community action team, reclaiming our streets, carrying out stop-and-search like never before, taking down the doors of drug dens and facing up to organised crime groups.

Alongside more officers, we want better equipment. I am delighted to see the roll-out of more Tasers, backed by the Government. We recently had issues with woefully inadequate body-worn cameras in my part of the world. We were sending hard-working police officers out there in harm's way with cameras that were not fit for purpose. I am delighted to say that we have improved that, but the police officers in my part of the world still do not benefit from good-quality sat-nav or GPS. The Government have a responsibility to ensure that police and crime commissioners equip our frontline officers with the things they need to do their job. We are making moves in the right direction, but we need to go much further. There are also greater powers to stop and search and a renewed approach to sentencing, getting tough and giving real justice out to those who deserve it.

Cleveland police has sorted itself out. It is making use of additional Government resource. It is on the side of the victims, and Cleveland's criminals should watch out. I look forward to speaking in this debate in a year's time, when someone is no more likely to be a victim of crime in Cleveland than anywhere else. We can make a real difference with this resource to the lives of people across Stockton South.

3.19 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab) [V]: Like others, I first wish to express my thanks to all Bedfordshire police officers and staff for all that they do on the front-line, keeping our communities safe, particularly in the face of significant challenges thrown up by the pandemic, which come hot on the heels of a decade of austerity that saw police numbers cut and violent crime rise.

Today, I want to raise the issues already raised by the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) about the funding provided to Bedfordshire police in the police grant report, which is a continuation of the structurally flawed funding model that has left Bedfordshire police under-resourced for years. The force has struggled to balance the budget at the same time as protecting our communities, due to inadequate central Government funding. Since 2018-19, it has had to rely on yearly, one-off special grants to tackle serious crime in order to ensure that it does not overspend. Short-term funding arrangements inhibit our police's ability to plan ahead to support and protect our communities. Just last year, Crest Advisory found that total police demand will continue to increase over the next three years, at the same time as the service continues to be underfunded and understaffed. Stakeholders across Luton and Bedfordshire—this is cross-party and includes those in

non-political roles—do not think that the funding formula is fit for purpose. It needs to be reviewed and amended to better reflect data on actual recorded crime levels and levels of threat.

I know that the Government recognise that, but by choosing to press ahead with allocating the grant under the current formula they are failing to properly resource Bedfordshire police to tackle the nature and quantity of crime that we face. Although Bedfordshire police's budget has increased, it has increased only at the same rate as those of other forces and is therefore still disproportionately underfunded.

Bedfordshire is funded as a rural county, but with two major towns, Luton and Bedford, it suffers from crime typically found in metropolitan city areas. Our county also—normally—has the fifth busiest airport in the country, a mainline railway and the M1, all of which fall within my constituency. As has already been outlined, Bedfordshire has more active organised crime groups than Norfolk and Suffolk put together, and more than Kent and Essex, and more Bedfordshire-based organised crime groups have links to firearms than do those in Hertfordshire, Kent, Norfolk and Suffolk put together. The drugs supply out of Bedfordshire to other areas of the country is the fourth highest in England and Wales, and in many cases is the origin of county lines crime.

Bedfordshire police is dedicated to maximising public safety, but at the moment it is being done on a shoestring. Rather than introducing a fair and equitable funding formula, Ministers have chosen to heap the burden on to hard-pressed local residents by raising the police precept to £15 for band D properties. This regressive form of taxation will mean that the most deprived communities, those with fewer band D properties, will get the least. There should be no winners and losers when it comes to public safety. In Bedfordshire, the increase in the precept will raise £6.9 million, but it is economically illiterate to expect local residents to foot the bill at the same time as their incomes and living standards have been devastated by the economic fallout from the pandemic. Short-term, one-off grants and the passing of the burden on to residents must stop. The Government must take ownership of this issue and implement an urgent review of the funding formula to ensure that Bedfordshire's police service receives the central Government support it needs. I hope that the Minister recognises that although Bedfordshire's police force is under-represented in funding, this debate is over-represented by Members from across Luton and Bedfordshire to make that point.

3.23 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con) [V]: At the outset, it is important to recognise the great job done by Suffolk police in what are, at present, incredibly challenging circumstances. The proposed increase in grant funding of £7.4 million, from £135.1 million to £142.5 million, coupled with the maximum increase in council tax of £15 per band D household, does enable the Suffolk police and crime commissioner, Tim Passmore, to put in place policies that enable the Suffolk constabulary to properly police the county and keep people safe. However, this is becoming an increasingly difficult task, with Suffolk being the fourth lowest centrally funded force per head of population in the country, and with the local taxpayer having to pay an ever-increasing share of this burden.

There is an urgent need, as my colleagues from Bedfordshire have said, for the police funding formula to be reviewed as part of the next comprehensive spending review. Moreover, a three-year settlement would greatly assist with long-term planning and responsible budgeting. It is welcome that Suffolk police is recruiting more officers. As a result of Operation Uplift, there will be 162 more officers over the next three years, with more police out on the streets. They are tackling county lines and violent crime. There will be investment in the cyber-crime unit, more work on fraud prevention and rural crime, an improved 101 service and, at a time when it is much needed, more support for the vulnerable and those at risk.

Suffolk is also at the forefront of collaboration with neighbouring forces, with the joint work with Norfolk yielding recurring annual savings of £22.2 million to the Suffolk taxpayer. These initiatives are welcome, but the Suffolk council tax payer is being asked to pay too high a proportion of their cost. There does need to be a rebalancing of the national grant to bring Suffolk in line with similar counties, properly taking into account the levels of wages and incomes, and as part of a fair and transparent levelling-up process. When my hon. Friend the Minister sums up, I ask him to commit to a full review of the funding formula ahead of the comprehensive spending review.

3.26 pm

Imran Ahmad Khan (Wakefield) (Con) [V]: Since the Prime Minister's first speech on the steps of Downing Street, it has been made clear that keeping our communities safe, increasing police numbers and providing them with the necessary funding has been a priority of this Conservative Government. The drive to recruit 20,000 new police officers has demonstrated a very real shift in policy to prioritise law and order.

West Yorkshire police, headquartered in my Wakefield constituency, has been bolstered by an additional 308 officers in the first year of this major recruitment drive, bringing the total number across West Yorkshire to 5,494 officers as of October 2020. The West Yorkshire police training and development centre, which lies in Wakefield district, is crucial in providing recruits with the skills needed to tackle crime and antisocial behaviour. As we continue recruiting more police officers, such training centres will be invaluable in training our frontline officers and therefore making a crucial contribution towards keeping our communities safe.

Important provisions are also being made by Her Majesty's Government to ensure our officers are better protected in the conduct of their duties, including equipping more officers with Tasers, as well as toughening sentences for those who assault our emergency workers, all of whom deserve the respect of all of us they are dedicated to safeguarding. Today's publication of the police funding settlement for 2021-22 marks a continuation of this Conservative Government's commitment to ensuring that our communities are kept safe and our police forces have the numbers, training and equipment necessary to operate effectively.

During a year in which all arms of Government have been brought together to bear down on tackling the spread of covid-19, growing police officer numbers, along with growing budgets and providing better protective measures to frontline officers have remained key objectives of this Government, which they are successfully securing.

The 2021-22 funding settlement will provide £15.8 billion of funding for the policing system, an increase of £636 million on the 2020-21 settlement. I am delighted that West Yorkshire police will receive £512.3 million this year, £27,300,000 more than last year's funding.

Although I enthusiastically welcome the funding, it is of fundamental importance that it leads to positive, visible and measurable outcomes and results. The increase in police numbers must lead to more police officers actively patrolling our streets. We must not allow ourselves to be deceived by the lazy Labour thinking that more money is always the solution to problems in and of itself. It is not. However, increased budgets do, when correctly employed, make it easier for important improvements to be made, whether they be changing systems, culture or training.

Wakefield is proudly home to West Yorkshire police force, the fourth largest territorial police force in England and Wales, yet, despite this, crime and antisocial behaviour remain an issue in Wakefield, whether that be rough sleeping, drug use, or reported crimes.

Over the past year, I have enjoyed the privilege of accompanying Wakefield district's neighbourhood policing team, headed by the inspirational Sergeant Matthew Jackson, in patrolling the streets of Wakefield, and I am in awe of their purposeful work and seek to see them fully resourced. They are a truly impressive and determined group of civic-minded officers who love and take pride in their communities, city, country and police force. Places that are proud homes of major police forces, such as Wakefield, must be examples of how we maintain law and order for the rest of the country.

I welcome today's police grant report and the new annual funding settlement, which, during this unprecedented global pandemic, clearly demonstrates for all that the Conservative party is the only party that can be truly relied on to support our police force, both in Wakefield and across the entire kingdom. Conservatives remain vigilant to ensure that this massive boost in funding is reflected in the sight of more police on our streets, safer communities and lower crime rates.

3.33 pm

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con) [V]: It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Imran Ahmad Khan), but even more of a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) and my colleague, the hon. Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins). I am now the third of the three Members of Parliament from Bedfordshire to press the case to the Minister for solving the problem that has beset our local force: the conundrum of the national funding formula.

I will, if I may, add to my colleagues' thanks to the officers of Bedfordshire police for their outstanding service to the community. In our relatively small county, our police not only have to deal with the regular crime that affects many other parts of the country, but have a special responsibility for security in and around our airport at Luton. They have responsibilities for motorway networks that course through Bedfordshire. They have issues of social community cohesion in our urban centres and they have to deal with rural crime as well. For any police force, those would be immense challenges at the best of times, but for Bedfordshire police in these difficult covid times, they have required of our officers an exceptional

[Richard Fuller]

level of dedication and service. On behalf of all the Members of Parliament for Bedfordshire, I thank them for their service.

I have listened to some of the contributions to the debate. I have heard some—if I might call it this—knocking copy against certain police and crime commissioners. In Bedfordshire, we do not need to do that. We have an outstanding police and crime commissioner in Kathryn Holloway, who has cleaned out some of the problems she inherited, strongly implemented a number of her programmes and created a strong basis for Bedfordshire police. She and Festus Akinbusoye, the candidate for PCC in the elections in May, have clear plans that will deliver a fair amount of effective policing across the whole of Bedfordshire. I will pose a couple of questions to the Minister a little later about some of Festus's proposals so that we can be confident that, when he is elected, they will be able to be funded and go forward.

On the national funding formula, it is sobering to realise, as my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire said, that this goes all the way back to 2004. Since then, there have been a total of 10 policing Ministers, including the current Minister, and five Prime Ministers, yet the pervasive underfunding of Bedfordshire police persists. I wonder whether my hon. Friend the Minister is that one in 10 who will say, “You know what? I’ve found a solution to it. I’ll find a way of giving Bedfordshire police the funding they deserve.” Seeing as it is nearly 6,000 days that the police officers of Bedfordshire have gone out every day and done their service for the community, it is time that we had a police Minister who says, “Yes, this is a challenge that I will meet and face up to.” I have every confidence that the Minister will respond positively to that.

The success of Bedfordshire police requires a clear strategy, and under Kathryn Holloway we have seen a reallocation of police resources towards dealing with rural crime. That is very important for Bedfordshire, where it is an undue weight on our limited resources. As a number of Members said, we ask our taxpayers to fund our police, and they have an expectation that the police will be there when they need them.

This Government and this Minister have delivered increased numbers of officers into Bedfordshire, and this year have delivered an above national average increase for Bedfordshire police. We are very grateful to the Minister and the Prime Minister for being so clear in their resolve to support our officers by putting funds behind them and more officers into the police force, but there are still some things that we need to do.

I turn to two issues that are of importance locally, and which Festus said are his priorities. They bear listening to by the Minister. The first is community-based policing. To be able to continue the commitment to provide policing across Bedfordshire, we need to be 100% sure—there needs to be a cast-iron guarantee from the Minister—that he will ensure that the Conservative manifesto commitment to increasing police numbers will continue, and that Bedfordshire police will continue to get its fair share, if not more, of the increase in officers. We stood on that manifesto pledge, and I am confident that when the Minister comes to the Dispatch Box he will give us that confirmation.

Secondly, in Festus's plan there is a renewed focus on drug rehabilitation programmes. I am very interested to hear from the Minister where he sees the priority for drug rehabilitation. I am sure he heard my colleagues talk about how Bedfordshire is the source of quite a lot of the drugs that spread across the country, so this is a very well targeted campaign by Festus. It will help with crime prevention in Bedfordshire and across the country too.

I am very grateful for the Minister's positive words about the defence of our police officers. I know that he and all Members, whatever their political persuasion, are disgusted at the ways in which some people are using the covid pandemic to put extra pressure on our police by threatening them in despicable ways. I hope the clear message comes from this debate that the force of the law will come down very strongly on people who abuse our police in that way.

3.39 pm

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con) [V]: I thank the Minister for his announcements today. I would also like to thank the Home Secretary, because I know how much she values all our police forces. That is why, with 6,620 extra police officers, we are now on target to deliver on our manifesto pledge of 20,000 new officers, 613 of whom are already working in the West Midlands. The financial settlement will see the West Midlands receiving an inflation-busting 5.8% increase to their budget. That is a staggering £36 million, and nearly eight times the rate of inflation. In addition, the local tax rises that residents pay, together with their council tax, put the West Midlands at the top of the league table for precept increases across England, with a staggering increase of 79% since 2012 that the Labour police and crime commissioner has imposed on local people in Dudley North and across the West Midlands.

However, figures show that crime continues to rise. Violent crime in the West Midlands has more than doubled since 2015, so we need robust regional leadership to tackle this, and a police and crime commissioner who is willing to work with the Home Secretary and the Policing Minister to deliver safer streets in our communities. Despite the unprecedented level of funding, sadly, I must report to the House that gang warfare recently broke out on Dudley High Street and that, a week later, a local businessman was murdered. It would seem that the Labour PCC has lost control of policing.

Dudley people and, I am quite certain, the people of the West Midlands can see that effective policing is about more than just money; it is about local decision making and how that filters down from the chief constable and the police and crime commissioner. Here, the facts sadly speak for themselves. This is about having the right strategy to deploy all the new police officers we are recruiting, about making the right decisions locally and about having the will and competence to deliver on them.

The Labour PCC has closed several police stations while spending more than £30 million on refurbishing plush offices at his headquarters at Lloyd House in Birmingham. Meanwhile, Dudley police station and Sedgley police station have closed. Some hope was given to Dudley people when a new police station in Dudley was promised. In fact, it was hailed by my predecessor as a new multimillion-pound station to replace the Brierley Hill one. Several years later, we are still waiting for it. In 2019, it was announced that it would open in

2021, yet no detailed plans have been submitted by the PCC to the council planning department. Dudley, a major metropolitan town, has a town centre that has been without a police station since late 2017, and we are now paying the price for no presence as a result of inaction and incompetence.

We have seen the stark difference when we have elected Mayors and police and crime commissioners who are able and make things happen, compared with those who just play politics. I stated earlier that it is much more than money that fixes problems; it is competence and leadership. Effective people can open doors in Government and unlock further funding, but only when coupled with plans that can show clear deliverability. This is what Andy Street has proved as our Mayor, and it is what I know we would have with Jay Singh-Sohal and with Andy again after the May elections. I will always back the police, and this Conservative Government will always back the police, because that is what people expect.

3.43 pm

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to be called to speak in this debate. I have listened intently to the debate this afternoon, and there have been many impassioned contributions to it. There has been much criticism of the Government, but I just want to say to Members on the Opposition Front Bench that there are opportunities for the Labour Mayor of London to show real appreciation of our police officers here by making sure that police officers can be exempt from the congestion charge in the same way as other emergency service workers are. I would implore them to make their petitions to the Mayor.

Today I would like to very much commend Chief Constable James Vaughan of Dorset Police and the whole Dorset force for the sterling work they have done over the years, but particularly over the last 12 months. It is also fitting that I thank the outgoing police and crime commissioner, Martyn Underhill, for his service and work as an independent police and crime commissioner for Dorset. I also very much commend the Conservative candidate, David Sidwick, who will be standing in the forthcoming election in May.

I am particularly pleased that, despite some political movements calling for the police force to be defunded, the Government continue their commitment not just to fund the police but to grow their capability. Dorset policing has had an uplift under those arrangements of £7.7 million. Thirty-nine more police officers are committed to Dorset, and I know that the coastal town of Lyme Regis in my constituency will benefit specifically.

I cannot let this opportunity pass without specifically commending those Dorset police officers who have worked extremely hard during this period of covid. Many Dorset police officers were prepared to go and support other parts of the country—particularly Kent, with the ports in the run-up to the end of the year. On behalf of all the constituents of West Dorset, I cannot say enough how grateful we are to those fearless members of the police force. I should also say that I speak on behalf of my colleague and neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) and, I am sure, all other Members from Dorset in the debate.

It is quite rare for a Member from Dorset to be interested in Northumbria. Despite the fact that the Government are making good progress and we are

seeing an extra £7.7 million, the Minister will well know from our previous correspondence that the police funding formula, and Dorset seeing more and being more fairly treated under it, are very important to me. We in Dorset received just 51% of our police funding through the national police funding formula, whereas Northumbria receives 80%. I very much look forward to the coming year, when I am sure the Minister will do as much as he can to review that formula.

As I have pointed out, Dorset has done a huge amount, but I would like to highlight the fact that we have many challenges with crime. The ongoing difficulty is actually growing when it comes to county lines. Small market towns—my home town of Sherborne, as well as Lyme Regis, Bridport, Dorchester and Beaminster—are now seeing county lines activity, and not just a little. We are seeing cuckooing at a level I never, ever thought I would see in the rural constituency of West Dorset. We see drugs being trafficked from Liverpool, from London, from Bristol and from across the country to this rural and coastal constituency. That is what is driving me to ensure that the Minister knows we feel very strongly about the funding formula. We in Dorset need to get to grips, as other parts of the country do, with the county lines disgrace we see across our country today. I am sure the Minister will take that on board. Hon. Members who have spoken in the debate—particularly my hon. Friends the Members for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) and for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous)—have articulated similar concerns from their constituencies, and I reiterate those.

In 2014, when I was a councillor on West Dorset District Council, I fought hard to ensure that our rural police stations remained open. That was at a time when I did not quite see eye to eye with the outgoing police commissioner, but none the less we found a way to keep them open and to keep access to them open to the local community. It is fair to say that we need to do more in that area now, and I implore the Minister, in his work going forward, to give that due consideration, for which I thank him very much.

3.49 pm

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con) [V]: It was a key manifesto commitment to recruit 20,000 more police officers into the force and, despite the pandemic, the Government are honouring that commitment. By the end of December we had already seen more than 6,500 extra officers, surpassing the recruitment target three months ahead of time.

Laws protect our general safety, ensure our rights as citizens against abuses and help to create a society based on fairness and respect for one another. Strong relationships of mutual trust between police agencies and the communities they serve are critical to maintaining public safety, effective policing and ensuring those laws are followed. We govern by consent, and that is also the way we police. Trust in the police hinges on society believing that police actions reflect community values and incorporate the principles of procedural justice and legitimacy. To do that, the police need the funding, and this £15.8 billion settlement, with a rise of £636 million, is welcomed by my chief constable.

Norfolk is extremely lucky. We have an exemplary chief constable in Simon Bailey, who is also the national lead on child protection. He has led his team through

[Duncan Baker]

this pandemic with his usual professionalism and utter dedication. We owe a huge debt of gratitude to him and all his staff and officers not just for protecting the county at this most difficult of times, but for working tirelessly to keep infection levels low by enforcing the Government regulations. My constituency alone has been a magnet for visitors, given its picturesque draw, so I thank Norfolk police for all they have been doing.

The £15 cap on a band D property is very welcome in boosting much-needed core funding. For Norfolk constabulary, that equates to a 5.6% increase, or £4.5 million in the base budget. We must bear it in mind that 2% of the uplift is required just to stand still and keep current resourcing and spend and current service levels when there is rising demand, but the remaining budget will be well used. We will see a domestic abuse perpetrators programme and 90 more officers on the frontline in Norfolk, which is getting on for a third more than the allocation from the 20,000 programme. The fact that Norfolk is over-recruiting is to be applauded and shows total commitment to keeping our public safe and secure.

Moreover, I commend Mr Bailey for investing heavily in a number of police digital investigators. As crime changes, the need to tackle hidden crimes grows ever greater. Abuse and exploitation of the vulnerable is despicable, and we will see justice served today in Norfolk with sentencing for an individual charged with grooming hundreds of young people. These heinous crimes can only be stopped with digital investment in officers.

I end with a mention of police and crime commissioners. Many constituents feel slightly unsure what they are and what they do, and it is important to raise that. An effective crime commissioner understands their role and responsibility. Their role is to be the voice of the people and to hold the police to account. It is to explain and engage with the electorate on the decisions taken and how budgets are used. If that is got right, working hand in hand with the chief constable, it can be an exemplary relationship.

Law and order is one of the cornerstones of our democracy. The Government are providing not just the funding, but the tools to let the police do their job properly. It is with that in mind that I commend this funding settlement to the House.

3.54 pm

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the excellent contributions we have had in today's debate. I begin, as many others have, by thanking our police officers and staff for everything they do to keep us safe. Covid has placed enormous strain on our police, and I thank them in the House today for putting their lives on the line for us.

As the shadow Home Secretary said in opening this debate, it is galling to hear warm words from this Government followed by a pay freeze and no news on when our police officers will be vaccinated. We do not oppose this year's settlement—we would not oppose a motion that puts more resource into our cash-strapped police forces—but we will not pretend that this is enough; that it fills the deep hole in resources that 10 years of cuts have caused; that it makes up for the catastrophic rise in violent crime and the collapse in charge rates that

this Government have overseen knowingly for many years; that it forgives a Government who have sat back and watched for a decade as hundreds of thousands of victims of crime have seen no justice done; or that it makes up for the levels of incompetence that have got us to a place where, when every taxpayer's pound counts towards tackling crime, the Government waste billions on bungled IT projects. This Government have a chaotic approach to crime, and it is the police and the public who are paying the price.

Let us begin with the funding formula, which has been debated so powerfully by cross-party representatives from Bedfordshire. My hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) and the hon. Members for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) and for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller) were united in calling for a change to the formula, which is outdated and unfair. In 2015 the now Minister for Crime and Policing himself described the formula as “manifestly unfair” and praised the then Minister for having “the cojones” to finally deal with it. However, much like the cladding crisis that the House heard about earlier today, the Government have not dealt with it. Northumbria's funding has fallen by 25%, while the figure for Surrey is only 11%. If the Government are serious about levelling up, they need to act. Perhaps the Minister can tell us when—or, indeed, if—he plans to address that inequality.

Turning to the police grant for 2021-22, we are told that overall funding will increase by £636 million from last year's settlement, and that includes £415 million for local police forces. Unfortunately, the £415 million increase is dwarfed by the £600 million that has just been slapped on to local forces to fund the vastly increased costs of the emergency services network. Although they may have a few years to pay, it is more than a major and completely unnecessary headache for local police chiefs, but the Minister has brushed it off as minimal. The hon. Member for Wakefield (Imran Ahmad Khan) challenged the Government to be vigilant in how they spend their money, and I agree with him.

Of course, we all know that there is still a £2.2 billion real-terms gap in central Government funding grants to local police forces, and a £1.6 billion real-terms gap in overall funding compared with 2010-11. Is it any wonder that charge rates have collapsed and that criminals go free and victims see no justice? To add insult to injury, instead of directly increasing funding for the police, Ministers have chosen to heap the burden on to hard-pressed local taxpayers, through the council tax precept. As my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) said, they are being asked to pay more for less. Through smoke and mirrors, the Government are passing on a bill of £15 a year to precept payers in the middle of a pandemic. Does the Minister accept that there is a £2.2 billion real-terms funding gap compared with 2010, and what does he think have been the consequences of that funding gap? Does he really think that now is the time to increase the tax burden on local people?

As my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) and others have said, the police workforce stands at 23,824 fewer personnel than in 2010. That includes 7,179 fewer police staff and 7,262 fewer police community support officers. I am hearing from police forces around the country that this is having a significant impact on the new officer uplift. The cuts to police staff

mean that newly recruited officers will end up behind desks, covering for the vital work of police staff instead of being on the streets. As my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington said, one should not be substituted for the other.

Cambridgeshire is having to cut 40 police community support officers, the entire team of seven community safety officers, and six inquiry desk officers. In Devon and Cornwall, the Conservative police and crime commissioner Alison Hernandez has announced plans to replace PCSOs with volunteer special constables. Warwickshire, as we have heard, is having to cut 56 police staff investigators, nine domestic abuse risk officers, 10 intelligence officers and 10 multi-agency support staff. Unison has described these moves as an “act of desperation.” We have raised this before with the Minister, but he brushes it off as being down to local decision making. Police staff are investigators, intelligence officers, forensic crime scene investigators and domestic abuse officers. They investigate and prevent crime to protect our communities.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) mentioned, the Prime Minister said last year that the most important thing politicians can do is back the police, yet this Government have no plans to replace the PCSOs or police staff that have been cut, despite overseeing increases in violent crime and record levels of knife crime. Perhaps the Minister can tell me what his Government have against PCSOs, or perhaps he will correct me and announce plans to fund more.

If this Government want to start getting a grip on the exponential rise in violent crime we have seen under their watch, they need to seriously up their game on prevention, with a public health approach to tackling violence. Many hon. Members have raised the issue of county lines and the impact it has on their communities. The Government announced funding for another year of violence reduction units, but they need a long-term funding commitment from the Government to carry out their vital preventive work.

Many areas that really need them do not have a violence reduction unit. I recently visited Cleveland virtually, and it has one of the highest violent crime rates in the country—the hon. Member for Stockton South (Matt Vickers) talked about it today—but it does not have a violence reduction unit. Perhaps the Minister can tell us why Cleveland and areas like it do not have a VRU. Why is tackling violent crime less important in those areas? Does he have any plans to address that imbalance?

Since the Conservatives took office, attempted murders have nearly doubled. Before lockdown, robberies were up 18% and weapons possession offences had increased by four fifths. Violence against the person has increased in every police force area in the country and, as many hon. Members pointed out, only one in 14 crimes leads to a charge. Can the Minister tell us what plans he has to tackle this crisis?

Unlike this Government, Labour’s record in government shows that we can be trusted on policing and crime. By the time we left government, there were 6 million fewer crimes than there were in 1997. The risk of being a victim of crime was at its lowest since the crime survey began in 1981, and police officers reached record numbers—up by almost 17,000 since 1997, alongside more than

16,000 police community support officers. It took us years to build up neighbourhood policing, and the Government are spending their years undoing that good work.

The first duty of any Government is the safety and security of the people they represent in our towns, our villages, our cities and all our communities across the country. This Government need to step up, and fast.

4.2 pm

Kit Malthouse: This has been an interesting and stimulating debate, with some great contributions from both sides of the House. Before I start, I want to thank all hon. Members for the tributes they have paid to our brave police officers across the country.

This has been possibly the most challenging period for UK policing since the second world war. We have been asking police officers to do jobs that we never thought they would have to do in our lifetime, and they have done them with skill, aplomb and courage. The fact that many of them have fallen victim to the virus—indeed, a number have lost their lives—is a cause of great sorrow, but I know they will take comfort from the support that hon. Members on both sides of the House have unequivocally given to them this afternoon.

I also express gratitude for the overwhelming revulsion at the increase in assaults on police officers that we have seen over the past few months and the past couple of years. It is something that we are determined to tackle as a Government, and it appears to me that we will have cross-party support for that measure when it comes forward in legislation later this year.

We had a number of good and interesting speeches throughout the debate, and I will address some of the themes that have been raised by hon. Members, rather than individual speeches. First, I want to address a couple of themes pursued by the Opposition Front Benchers and, in fact, by Opposition Members throughout the debate.

First, I want to address an issue raised by the shadow Home Secretary right at the start, when he accused me and the Home Secretary of being “soft on crime”. Well, I do not think that the Home Secretary has ever been accused of being soft on anything, let alone crime. Given my own record of fighting crime in London—I am proud of the contribution that I made—I think that is an unfair accusation. The hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) was boasting about Labour’s performance in the crime survey, so she will of course know that, according to the crime survey, overall crime and violent crime is below the level it was in 2010. Although that number has stabilised and we have seen a different pattern—certainly from violence in recorded police crime—if she is judging us on that particular measure, as she is judging her party, she has to accept that crime remains below the 2010 figure. Nevertheless, there are some significant issues that need to be addressed and I will come to those in a moment.

There was a strong theme in Opposition speeches—I note that there was no Liberal Democrat participation, but nevertheless a small number of Labour Members have participated—that was effectively accusing the Government over the last 10 years of somehow cutting police officer numbers or cutting the resources for police as a discretionary choice. In fact, as you will know, Madam Deputy Speaker, we were dealing with the consequences of the largest crash that we have seen in this country—indeed, the largest global crash seen since

[*Kit Malthouse*]

the 1930s. It was a crash brought about by deregulation of the financial services industry largely propelled by, I guess, Labour party dogma in terms of financial services. We have traded this argument many times during the nearly 18 months in which I have been in this job. In fact, it was a debate that was had to a high degree during the campaign in the run-up to the 2019 election.

The British people are smart enough to realise that where the public finances are concerned, we have to cut the cloth accordingly. They recognise that post that crash, we had to do something to get the balance sheet in order, and that required restrictions in expenditure across the whole public sector. To be honest, given what we have had to do during this pandemic to support people across the country and their businesses, thank God we did. If we had not, God knows what parlous state the finances would be in now. As it is, we have been able to get through this as best we can, supporting neighbourhoods, communities and businesses across the country because we rebuilt the balance sheet and rebuilt sound public finances. I make no apology for that at all.

A number of themes were promulgated during the debate, and I will address them in turn. First, my congratulations to the team from Bedfordshire on their pincer manoeuvre. Happily for them, I have recently visited Bedfordshire police and seen for myself the burdens that crime—particularly serious and organised crime—places on that force. I also had a discussion with the chief constable earlier this week about the challenges that that force is facing at the moment. I think I am due to meet my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) and residents from Leighton Buzzard quite soon to talk about crime in his area; we will certainly have a look at that.

The key theme raised by a number of Members across the House was the funding formula. I am happy to reiterate the commitment that I have made from this Dispatch Box in the past, which is that we are going to review it this side of the election. I am happy to say that the scoping work has already started in the Home Office. We are hopeful of bringing forward the various steps we have to go through for the funding formula in the future. The hon. Member for Croydon Central is quite right that, as a Back Bencher, I railed against the existing funding formula, not least because of the effect that it has on Hampshire police, but at the moment it remains the most reliable—if slightly elderly—formula that we have for allocating resources, so until we manage to devise a new one, the work for which we will be doing soon, I am afraid that we have to stick with it.

A number of Members quite rightly raised the issue of vaccinations for police officers. As I have said publicly and, indeed, in meetings with the federation and others, both the Home Secretary and I have made the point to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and through Government that police officers face a particular exposure to the virus that we think necessitates their being prioritised once the first four groups have been dealt with. That decision is not in our hands—it sits with the independent committee that makes the decisions about who gets vaccinated—but nevertheless we, along with the federation and others, have made that point strongly.

A number of Members, not least my hon. Friends the Members for West Dorset (Chris Loder) and for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker), made representations about county lines and the violence that is being promulgated throughout the country by drugs gangs. We are making enormous strides in confronting those gangs, with 550 county lines closed down in the past 12 months, and we have doubled the money that we are putting into county lines, with a further £20 million being allocated this year and more money going into dealing with serious and organised crime and the upstream effects of drugs.

Over the past four or five years, the issue of drugs has become central to crime in this country and, as a Government, we are determined to confront it. I think it is fair to say that every time I speak to the Prime Minister he has an obsession with the impact of drugs in society and wants us to work as hard as we can to roll back the effects of that horrendous industry in our neighbourhoods, towns and cities. Over the next few months, Members will see an even more assertive approach to it.

Let me turn to one or two particular specific themes that were raised. My hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) made an excellent speech touching on several themes that were echoed by a number of other Members. Along with my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Imran Ahmad Khan), he pointed out that it is not about how big a budget is; it is about what we do with it. Much of that comes down to the collaboration between the police and crime commissioner and the local chief constable. Given that we are approaching an election for police and crime commissioners, it is no surprise that we heard a number of, shall we say, political interventions and speeches, with a view towards that collaboration and helping people to put their cross in the right box.

Police and crime commissioners can have an enormous impact on performance in their area. Alongside the new National Policing Board and the performance board that sits underneath it, we are going to do our best to make sure that it is about not just the budget but the effect, the focus and a drive for change in every single police area throughout the country. I hope people will see that in future.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kettering also raised ANPR as an issue, and, in correspondence to me, a number of Members have previously referred to traffic police and the need to grip the transport network. We believe that is the key to fighting crime.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kettering—I am privileging him because he is one of the few Members who are actually present—also raised the issue of Taser roll-out. He will know that last year we announced £10 million of extra Taser funding to allow chiefs to roll Tasers out to those who wish to use them. Using a Taser is often less impactful, shall we say, and likely to cause less injury than hitting somebody with an ASP, and it provides officers with protection in a way that perhaps other defensive equipment may not. We are keen to see that those officers who want a taser can acquire one to use for their own protection. I hope that when we bring forward in legislation the police covenant, which will contain a commitment from the Government to look towards the safety and wellbeing of police officers, my hon. Friend will support that as enthusiastically as he has offered his support this afternoon.

Finally—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] I hear murmuring from the Whips. I had a challenge from a number of Members, not least my hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller), about the Government’s commitment to increasing the number of police officers by 20,000 over last year and the next two years. As I said on Monday in Home Office questions, to me that commitment is as strong as the ravens’ to the Tower, and the legend goes that should the ravens ever leave the tower, the kingdom will fall. Our commitment to the 20,000 police officers is about as rock-solid as it gets. If we fail to achieve that target—I am confident that we will—there will obviously be significant implications, not least for me, so we will be working very hard to ensure that, whatever the disposition of police officers over the next two or three years, we get to that 20,000 by the target date.

Finally, Members raised the burden that covid has placed on police forces and the financial cost to them over the last few months. I am happy to say that later this week, we will make further announcements about more money that we will be giving to police forces—we are finalising the figures at the moment—on top of the £30 million that we have given them in the interim. I hope that that means we can round off this year as one of the most generous for policing in the last decade, if not the most generous, and move into a second year that continues the trajectory of growth and performance as we drive down crime across the whole country.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That the Police Grant Report (England and Wales) for 2021-22 (HC 1162), which was laid before this House on 4 February, be approved.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I have now to announce the result of today’s deferred Division on the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (All Tiers and Self-Isolation) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2021, statutory instrument No. 97. The Ayes were 526 and the Noes were 24, so the Ayes have it. I will briefly suspend the House in order that the necessary arrangements for the next business can be made.

[The Division list is published at the end of today’s debates.]

4.15 pm

Sitting suspended.

Local Government Finance (England)

4.20 pm

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick): I beg to move,

That the Local Government Finance Report (England) 2021-22 (HC 1200), which was laid before this House on 4 February, be approved.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): With this it will be convenient to consider the following motions:

That the Referendums relating to Council Tax Increases (Alternative Notional Amounts) (England) Report 2021-22 (HC 1201), which was laid before this House on 4 February, be approved.

That the Referendums relating to Council Tax Increases (Principles) (England) Report 2021-22 (HC 1202), which was laid before this House on 4 February, be approved.

Robert Jenrick: Among the many acts of heroism that we have seen over the past year, the quiet dedication, hard work and compassion shown by all who serve their communities in local government has truly shone through. I am sincerely thankful for their efforts. I am grateful to them for protecting the most vulnerable, including those who are shielding from the pandemic, and providing unprecedented levels of support through Everyone In to reduce rough sleeping, bringing it to the lowest levels that we have seen for many years. I am grateful to councils for their support for local businesses, enterprises and entrepreneurs; for keeping essential public services going against the odds; and for the part that they are now playing in the success of our national vaccine programme, ensuring that it reaches all communities and paving the way for our recovery as a nation later this year.

From the outset of the pandemic, we promised to do everything within our power to support local authorities during this most unusual and difficult time. Our local government financial settlement shows that we have kept that promise, with a real-terms increase in core spending power and a guarantee that no council anywhere in the land will receive less funding than it did last year. That stands alongside an unprecedented package of covid-19 support this year and next year, totalling more than £11 billion directly to councils and £30 billion in additional help for local councils and their businesses and communities.

The settlement strengthens social care, with councils able to access an additional £1 billion, comprising £300 million from the social care grant and a 3% adult social care council tax precept. It also supports children’s social care, helping councils to provide better services for the most vulnerable children in society, children in care and children with disabilities. Those vital services have experienced severe disruption over the last few months and will no doubt experience further demand as we ease lockdown and move forward as a country.

Balancing the contributions of national and local taxpayers, this settlement gives councils increased flexibility, with a 2% council tax referendum limit for most authorities and an extra 3% for social care authorities, which councils may choose to defer until 2022-23. I can inform the House that many councils, particularly Conservative ones, are indeed doing so. The council tax referendum principles are not a cap, nor do they force councils to set

[Robert Jenrick]

taxes at the threshold level. Councils should and must consider the financial concerns of local residents at this most challenging time, alongside the public's support for action on keeping our streets safe and providing essential services.

Recognising the vital door-to-door services that councils deliver day in, day out to the most isolated, our settlement provides an extra £4 million to authorities in remote rural areas through the rural services delivery grant, taking the total to £85 million—the highest contribution to the delivery of public services in our rural areas to date. Lower-tier local councils will also receive a new £111 million lower-tier services grant, with main funding allocations for the full range of council services rising in line with inflation.

Finally, we know that the new homes bonus accounts for a considerable part of funding for many councils. We are therefore implementing a further round of the bonus allocations, with the same 0.4% funding baseline as last year and no new legacy payments on the new round. We will reform it over the course of next year to ensure that this significant amount of money is focused on the councils that are keenest to build, build, build and get the homes this country needs under way.

While these measures are providing confidence and stability, we know that councils will continue to face very unusual challenges as a result of covid-19 for quite some time, despite all the success of the vaccine roll-out, so today I am setting out further details of nearly £3 billion in additional covid-19 support for councils next year. We were able to provide certainty to local councils in December on allocations for £1.55 billion of un-ringfenced funding, and I am now very pleased to confirm, on top of the funding already provided in the settlement, the final allocations for £670 million of grant funding for local council tax support. This helps local authorities to continue reducing council tax bills for those who are finding it hardest to pay.

We have also provided our published final position on the extension of the sales, fees and charges scheme from April to June 2021, a vital safety net for councils facing lost income as a result of covid-19, ensuring that everything—from the local car parks to our theatres, heritage attractions and all the things that local councils provide and which demand income to keep going—will have that guarantee of certainty and confidence to move forward until at least the mid-point of this calendar year. They will soon receive grant funding reflecting 75% of irrecoverable losses in their council tax and business rates income from 2020-21, with an up-front payment early in the financial year to aid cash flow. In both respects, we have listened to the sector, acted and provided them with the certainty and the resources they need. We made promises and we have kept them, and we are making sure that local councils can continue to deliver for their citizens.

We know that a handful of councils face serious financial challenges—some, it has to be said, due to very poor management, but others due to the exceptional events of the past year. There is quite a broad range, and today we are publishing details of the targeted support that we are providing to four councils unable to balance their budgets without some additional recourse

to Government. This aid is provided on an exceptional basis, with these councils being subject to rigorous reviews of their financial positions, their governance and their ability to meet some or all of their budget gaps for the next year without Government funding. Taxpayer support of this kind is never provided lightly, and in return for the increased flexibility afforded to councils next year, we expect sound financial management, with residents shielded from unaffordable increases.

I wish I could say that here, in our nation's great capital, the Greater London Authority is blazing a trail that others might wish to follow, but, sadly, the opposite is true. I have reluctantly placed before the House today a principle to allow for the Mayor of London's request to increase council tax by £15 on band D properties without holding a referendum in order to fund transport concessions above the level available elsewhere. This brings the total increase in precept he is seeking from Londoners to nearly 10%. While the final decision on the increases rests with the Mayor, and with the Mayor alone, I would urge him to abandon this ill-judged pursuit of tax hikes and to behave responsibly at a time of great difficulty for Londoners.

We want to unite and level up our councils, as we do the whole of the country, and to build back better from this pandemic and stronger than before. That starts with holding local polls in May this year. We said that further delaying elections would require a high bar, and the huge success of our vaccine programme gives us confidence that we can and should now move forward. More than ever, people deserve their say on issues ranging from safer streets to the level of council tax, and we are providing £15 million to ensure that our polls are made covid-secure. My Department and the Cabinet Office will do all we can to support local council officers and the brilliant staff and volunteers of polling stations the length and breadth of England with the hard work and challenges that lie ahead. We want to ensure that the process is as smooth as possible and, in particular, that as many schools as possible can remain open.

We know that there are challenges posed by the pandemic, of course there are, and we also know that the scars are likely to take time to heal, but we are not cowed by them. We want to work together to learn from our experiences and to solve long-term problems in local government, because councils will be the thread running through our response to each and every one of these issues. We will empower them to reboot and restart vital public services on which communities depend, from health to justice: making sure that vulnerable children get the care that they need; helping schools to see children returned safely and address lost learning, particularly in our most deprived communities; and increasing funding for social care to help tackle the backlog in assessments while laying the foundations for future reforms and a sustainable future for the sector for decades to come.

As we tackle those issues, we will help councils to grapple with the sharp drops in footfall that we have seen on our high streets, and the knock-on effects for local businesses. Our £3.6 billion towns fund and the urban centre recovery taskforce will ensure that our towns and city centres are renewed and become once again the vibrant places that we love and want to see people living, working and shopping in again, attracting tourists from home and abroad.

Our £900 million getting building fund is integral to this work, kickstarting local recoveries and delivering the next generation of roads, bridges, 5G networks and full-fibre broadband, with more than 50% of the shovel-ready projects already started, creating thousands of jobs all over the country. Our £4 billion new levelling-up fund will invest in high-value local projects, regenerating eyesores, upgrading town centres, breathing new life into local arts and culture and, above all, creating and sustaining jobs. We will be setting out more details on that shortly through my right hon Friend the Chancellor.

In each and every one of these endeavours, we see a very strong role for local councils, knowing their communities best and being at the heart of their future economic recovery. We do this while helping councils to seize new opportunities, particularly in technology. We do not intend to return to the way things were done before by default. As we leave the pandemic, we want to ensure that councils build back better, build better public services and embrace some of the good things that have come out of this unusual period. Councils have rightly embraced meeting and working remotely, and we will build on reforms to digitise our planning system, utilise our local digital fund and ensure that local authorities fully embrace moving more meetings, services and processes online, transforming how they deliver for residents, for their staff and for the country.

We will work with councils to build back better from the pandemic, becoming a more prosperous, greener, safer and more neighbourly country. Local councillors will be a golden thread woven through the fabric of that better country. The settlement that we are debating today provides local councils with the resources that they need to plan for the future. It recognises the role that councils have played every day at the forefront of our response to covid-19, and we thank and salute them for the hard work that they have done on our behalf. This settlement places them at the heart of our national recovery. I commend this motion to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I should inform the House that the Order Paper notes that these instruments have not yet been considered by the Select Committee on Statutory Instruments. I have now just been informed that the Committee has in fact considered the instruments and has not drawn them to the attention of the House. The Committee's report will be published on Friday.

4.34 pm

Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): I start by echoing the Secretary of State's praise for frontline council workers and others involved in delivering frontline public services, including volunteers. They really have done a tremendous, heroic job in supporting communities through the unprecedented circumstances of the past year.

Last November, the Chancellor of the Exchequer told councils that he would

"increase their core spending power by 4.5%."—[*Official Report*, 25 November 2020; Vol. 684, c. 829.]

The Communities Secretary followed suit, telling us that English councils would see a

"4.5% real-terms cash increase in core spending power"—[*Official Report*, 17 December 2020; Vol. 686, c. 431.]

What they did not make quite so clear was that those funding increases were based on the assumption that council tax would go up by 5%. To be clear, in the Treasury spreadsheets, that is an assumption, not an option.

It is hard to believe, but this Conservative Government have chosen to clobber hard-working families with a council tax hike after the Government's incompetence left the country facing the worst crisis of any major economy. Household budgets are under pressure like never before. Millions of people are fearful for their job security. Millions have seen their incomes plunge. Millions more families are using food banks or going into debt just to survive, and now, thanks to the Government, families are being forced to pay the price for Conservative failure with a council tax hike made in Downing Street.

We know that Government Members have been coached to say that councils have a choice in this, but with social care by far the biggest factor driving up councils' costs, there is no real choice at all. Councils that refused to implement the Tory council tax hike would have to cut social care for older people in the middle of an unprecedented health crisis that is primarily affecting the same older people.

Let us not forget that because a council tax increase raises less money in poorer areas, the Government are deepening the postcode lottery for social care, instead of ensuring that every older and disabled person gets the care they need, wherever they live. The Government are not levelling the country up, in the way the Secretary of State just described. Instead, they are pulling it apart.

We know the Government recognise that there is a social care crisis, because the Prime Minister admitted it on the day he entered No. 10 Downing Street. He boasted that he had a plan to fix it, but no one has seen a dot or a comma of it ever since. All we have seen are sticking plasters while the crisis rages on and more and more older people are denied the care they need and deserve. The Government's failure is simply increasing the pressure on our NHS when we should be doing all we can to protect it.

Last March, the Chancellor told councils that he would fund them to do "whatever it takes" to get communities through the pandemic. On the back of that promise, councils set to work correcting the Government's failures on personal protective equipment distribution, contact tracing, shielding and much more, but the Government did not repay those costs. Instead, they left councils facing a £2.5 billion funding black hole. That is not my figure; it comes from the Conservative-led Local Government Association. If the Government had not broken their promises, there would be no need to plug the gap now with a council tax increase.

Perhaps the Government could not find £2 billion to prevent a council tax rise because they had already stuffed the money into their friends' pockets. Despite stark warnings from the National Audit Office last November, the Government have handed out £2 billion in crony contracts to companies with close personal links to senior Conservative party politicians. More than 500 companies were fast-tracked for covid-related contracts simply because they had relationships with Conservative MPs. That made them 10 times more likely to secure contracts than other businesses that could well have done the job better.

[*Steve Reed*]

The chairman of Clipper Logistics donated £725,000 to the Conservative party. He was rewarded with a £1.3 million contract to set up an Amazon-style PPE distribution network. Instead of the next-day delivery service that care workers were promised, they had to wait so long to receive any PPE at all that town halls had to pay to go out and find their own. Then there is Radox, which pays the Conservative right hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson) handsomely to act as an adviser. The Government gave Radox a contract worth half a billion pounds last year to provide covid tests, but they were so defective that 750,000 had to be recalled.

Serco, of course, is responsible for the Prime Minister's "world-beating" test and trace system, which is so world-beating that the Government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies described it last year as having only a "marginal impact" on reducing the spread of the virus. It never worked properly, but it cost £22 billion. Serco's chief executive is the brother of a former Conservative MP and his wife has donated thousands of pounds to the Conservative party. The company counts among its former senior executives the current Minister for Health. The Government handed Serco a £108 million contract for a failing system that could have been run better by directors of public health for a fraction of the cost, and then Ministers rewarded that catastrophic failure with another £57 million contract for "management services support" at testing sites. This is not the behaviour we would expect in an advanced democracy such as our great country; it is the wilful incompetence and endemic cronyism that we would expect in a tinpot dictatorship.

The Government are simply wrong to force councils to hike up council tax after their own mistakes led this country into the deepest recession of any major economy. Not only is it unfair on the families forced to pay the price of Tory failure, but it is economically illiterate, because hitting people with tax rises in the middle of a pandemic makes them tighten their belts and stop spending, when we should be rebuilding confidence to promote economic recovery.

The Conservatives' priorities are wrong, which is why Labour will not vote for their Tory tax hikes today. They should be helping families manage hard-pressed household budgets, not stuffing billions of pounds into the pockets of Tory party donors. They should be fixing the social care crisis, not forcing hard-working people to pay more but get less as social care is cut back even harder. They should be promoting economic recovery on our high streets, not choking off spending with tax hikes at a time when families are struggling simply to make ends meet. But it is still not too late. I urge the Government to think again, scrap Rishi Sunak's council tax bombshell—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Gentleman must refer to the Chancellor of the Exchequer as the Chancellor of the Exchequer or as the right hon. Gentleman, and not refer to him by using his name.

Steve Reed: I absolutely agree. I urge the Government to think again, scrap the Chancellor's council tax bombshell, stop stuffing billions of pounds into Conservative

party donors' pockets and stand by their commitment to support councils and communities to get through this crisis.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am sorry to have stopped the hon. Gentleman in his peroration, but it is really important in these times, when things are not normal in this Chamber, that we stick to the highest standards, and I thank him for immediately putting right his phraseology. It was not a great mistake, and I am grateful for his support.

4.43 pm

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con) [V]: I thank the Government for their generous assistance to councils to help us through the pandemic crisis. My constituency is served by West Berkshire Council and Wokingham District Council—both are unitaries. They certainly needed money to assist with the extra costs that covid-19 has caused, and there was a scheme, the pressures grant, to do that. The councils certainly needed assistance to deal with losses of tax revenues, and there was a scheme to reimburse 75% of lost tax revenues during these extraordinary times of business closures and business stress. There were clearly difficulties with shortfalls on sales, fees and charges, and again a scheme was introduced—I am pleased to see today that that is being extended for another quarter, because it looks as though there still will be an overhang into the second quarter of this calendar year. I am particularly pleased that there is additional assistance to allow councils to be sympathetic to people who are struggling to pay their council tax. The one little niggle that Wokingham has still suffered from is that where the council has brought in private sector management for a leisure sector, there can be difficulties with reimbursement for lost revenues. I would like to see further progress in sorting that out.

In the past, both West Berkshire Council and Wokingham Borough Council have suffered from pretty tight, or low, social care grants, and I am pleased to see a reasonable increase in social care grant going through for the next year. I urge Ministers to continue to look at that grant, because there is growth in demand and need, and we want high standards of care for people who require assistance. Certain councils, particularly the two serving my constituency, which were right at the bottom of the pack in terms of the amount of grant in relation to population, needed some tweaking of the sums. It is a very difficult situation. It is as costly looking after the elderly or children in Wokingham and west Berkshire as it is in the rest of the country, so we need at least as much, proportionately, as other places. We have often suffered from that.

I want to reinforce the Secretary of State's important message about the role that councils can and should play in getting the country back to work and, in particular, in revitalising, refreshing and renewing our town centres, our village shopping areas and some of the shopping centres in which councils are engaged or have a stake. It is true that councils are very important agents in setting the tone, providing the regulations, sorting out the planning, and sometimes, as co-owners or landlords, creating the right kinds of spaces in our town centres and facilitating or providing the right environment for a return to vibrant life.

Let us be in no doubt: this is going to be a big ask and a difficult task, because the covid crisis and the resulting closures have accelerated a number of trends that were already under way. There will be more online shopping relative to shopping in shops, even after we get some return to normal and people can get out more and more shops can open. People will need to be tempted back to the restaurants and the cafés. We will need to work carefully with the businesses that own and run the shops and manage the cafés and restaurants to make sure that government, where it can, assists them and allows for the adaptation and development of town and village centres so that they can flourish again, with probably a different mix of services and businesses from that which preceded the covid crisis.

For example, as councils are usually the highways authority and they control access to town or village centres, surely the first thing they need to do is to review that access. A lot of families are going to need the car for elderly people, for children or because of the distance they are from the town centre in order to get there in the first place. They may need the car because if they are buying too much shopping to carry easily, they will need the boot to take the shopping back home. We need to make sure that car access is permitted. That requires looking at junctions to smooth them and make them safer, but also to improve the safe flow of traffic. I was pleased to hear the Secretary of State mention that there will be money for bridges, because quite often impediments to getting into towns are created by railway lines and rivers, and we may need more bridging capacity. I hope that the Government will look particularly at light-controlled junctions, because those with the wrong phasing can be clumsy and impede people's progress into town, city and village centres.

Councils often either own the parking provision or are important in making sure that it is adequate, and they sometimes regulate the car parks. I therefore hope that they will understand that in order to tempt people back into these centres to turn them back into the vibrant spaces we want, there may need to be a discount or a generous offer, certainly in the early days, to give people the idea that it is safe to go back into the town, that they are wanted there, and that they can then park for long enough. Increasingly, visits to our towns and shopping centres will not just be for an hour or so to go and do a bit of quick shopping—people will want to sit down and have a coffee or lunch. They may want to take advantage of some of the services in the town centre, as well as actually buying physical goods. They may wish to enjoy the experience of lingering a bit longer in the shops, having been denied that for so long. I hope councils will look carefully at parking arrangements, and be generous.

I hope planning authorities will look carefully at flexibility so that owners, who may include the councils themselves, are allowed to carry out sensible plans for optimising the use of the building. The Secretary of State has been doing a lot of work on ensuring that planning restrictions and designations do not get in the way of sensible flexibility. Indeed, we will need plenty of flexibility and imagination, because a number of businesses that operated in town and city centres a year or more ago will not be available. A great number of large chains of shops have gone through receivership or made major reductions, having come to the conclusion, one way or another, that they want fewer physical stores. Even if

they have a good online offer, which will work with their favoured locations, we will see a lot of those chains retreat from high streets and shopping centres. I also fear that, wherever possible, a lot of small shops may need a friendly arm around them from the council and the Government, as otherwise we could lose a lot of capacity in the small shop area.

I trust that councils and the Government will work to make the situation as attractive as possible. A bit of money may need to be spent on beautifying towns and village centres, and ensuring they are in good order to welcome people back. Councils often have town or shopping centre managers, who need to be given backing in order to come up with imaginative solutions.

This huge task is in everybody's interests, including shoppers, landlords, employees and the councils. Above all, councils need to help the Government to rebuild the tax base of our towns, cities and village centres, and ensure that there will be that flow of business revenue in future—not just business rates, but the trading revenues that the national taxation system can collect and reroute to local government. Without prosperity there is not sufficient money for great public services, and councils must be part of the process through which that prosperity is rebuilt. I thank the Secretary of State for the help he has offered local councils. I urge him to please be generous on social care, and to do everything he can to promote the recovery we desperately need.

4.52 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I declare an interest as I am a vice-president of the Local Government Association. I also echo the thanks that the Secretary of State and shadow Secretary of State have rightly given to local authorities, councillors, and their staff for the incredible work they have done for our communities in the past 12 months. Whether that work was particular to covid-related issues, or whether it involved social care, public health, environmental services, paying business grants, or keeping day-to-day essential services such as refuse collection going, they have been a credit to our communities and we should thank them for their work.

Recently, the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee held hearings into local government finance, and we heard from Councillor James Jamieson, chair of the LGA, and Councillor Richard Watts, chair of the LGA resources board, which showed how the LGA works cross-party. They both gave us the same message: a recognition of the help that the Government have given to councils to meet the costs of the covid crisis, but also a recognition that those costs, particularly the loss of revenue that has affected many councils in different ways, have not been fully compensated. They estimated a gap of around £2.6 billion between the money that councils spent and have not received in income, and what the Government have compensated them for.

It is not often that I agree with the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), but he referred to the problems faced by some councils that do not run their leisure services directly, and that is equally true of Sheffield. Ours is run by an arm's length trust, and because the losses of the trust are paid for by the council, with the council paying more than £12 million to keep our leisure services sustainable, that is not regarded as a loss of council income but a council cost—extra

[Mr Clive Betts]

expenditure—and has not been compensated for in the same way. There is an unfairness there that affects many authorities in the country, and it needs addressing.

The Government's scheme to compensate councils for losses in council tax and business rate collection is welcome, but it is only for 75% of the losses. That needs to be monitored, because we can all see that, as the economy hits rocky times in the next 12 months and more people lose their jobs and more businesses are liquidated, councils will need extra support. We do not know what the ongoing costs of covid will be or how long the lockdown will extend for, so we still cannot estimate all the pressures on councils for the next financial year. I hope the Government will retain a degree of flexibility about any further support that councils may need in the next 12 months.

Of course, the costs of covid come on top of a very precarious situation for local government finance as a whole and for many local councils in particular. Estimates from the LGA and others show about a £5 billion gap before covid hit, due to councils facing the biggest cuts of any part of the public sector since 2010 and the rising costs of social care. Those pressures have led to really heavy cuts to important services such as road safety, bus services, libraries, street cleaning and many others.

The position is unsustainable. Rob Whiteman, the chief executive of the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy, told the Select Committee the other day that he knew of 12 authorities that have had to go to Government to ask for extra capitalisation of revenue expenditure, to ensure that their books can balance. Some of those councils may have particular problems, some may have created particular problems and others may be badly hit by covid, but in the end, it reflects a long-term problem for councils. As Rob Whiteman said, those 12 councils are probably only the tip of the iceberg. Many other councils could be entering very similar grounds for having to come to the Government for extra help in the near term, as their position substantially worsens. That is not a sustainable position for the long term.

Councillor Jamieson and Councillor Watts both said that when looking to the future of local government finance, we simply have to sort out the funding of social care. The 4.6% extra spending for councils next year is welcome, but it is clear that the costs of adult social care and children's social care, rising above inflation in the future, cannot continue to be funded by council tax and business rates. It is simply not sustainable, so finding another way forward to fund social care is essential. I draw the Secretary of State's attention again to the joint Select Committee report published nearly four years ago, which the Government still have not responded to. In that report, we put forward a social care premium as a solution, similar to arrangements that have worked for the long term in Germany and Japan. The Government have not yet come back to us. My Select Committee may look at this issue again, because until we sort out the problem of social care funding, the rest of local government finance will always remain challenged and not properly addressed.

The Local Government Association emphasised again that it understands, as does the Select Committee, precisely why the Government could only give a one-year settlement

this year. However, as well as asking the Government to sort out the long-term funding of social care, we want to say as strongly as we can to them that local government must have a four-year settlement as soon as possible, by which we mean for the financial year from 2022 onwards. That will give local government the certainty to be able to plan ahead in a way that makes the best use of the resources available to it and gives the best value for money for its constituents.

4.59 pm

Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in a local government finance debate, because it is an area close to my heart. I want to begin by echoing words that have been spoken on both sides of the Chamber: councils have absolutely played a blinder during the pandemic. We have asked a lot of our local authorities at every level, and they have consistently delivered in the most challenging circumstances. Those circumstances are challenging not just because of the pandemic, but because of the financial situation councils have faced over the past few years.

The structure of the settlement between local and central Government needs to be reformed. There is something fundamental about the revenue support grant and financial settlement that needs to be reformed. Put bluntly, it is broken. We cannot keep bailing it out year after year. The fair funding review, which was set to come in about 18 months ago, and then again this year, was a very good way of going about that reform, and I commend the Department for the work it has done to identify and address the issues. It is unfortunate that emergency measures had to be put in place during the pandemic and that we did not get to the stage we needed to in implementing the review.

The problem is that it is about much more than simply tweaking the formula. We need to look at the whole relationship between where revenue is raised and where it is spent, and that involves looking much wider than simply at council tax, formula grant and the new homes bonus, which has been such a lifeline to councils over the last few years. We need to look at how we reform business rates. Some in this Chamber have argued for 100% retention of business rates, and there is definitely an argument for that, although it might make some London authorities richer than some small European countries. Some might see that as no bad thing, but we need to make sure that there is an equitable distribution of business rate revenue that supports our wider goals.

It is those wider goals that I want to spend a couple of moments talking about. The first is levelling up and the second—not to sound like a broken record from the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee—is of course social care. Let us take levelling up first. We cannot level up until we reform the way we distribute financial support for house building. At the moment, we are supporting houses in areas where the markets need it; what we need to do is recognise that housing is part of the solution to levelling up. We have to make a choice: are people going to live in an area, or are we going to put the jobs there? It is about pump-priming, and we need to make a call on investing in housing in the former red wall areas and other areas that need levelling up. I am passionate about that, and I know that the Minister and the Secretary of State are aware of that.

We also need to recognise that we do not level up without providing sustainable enterprise—jobs for the people who live in those houses. We need to make sure that we are not just looking at this from a departmental point of view, but working across Government to realise this country's ambition to be truly one nation and a global Britain in a newly connected world.

Looking specifically at the problems we face in the formula grant and the amount allocated to local government to spend on services, the elephant in the room is of course social care. Reforming the social care element of funding—how the revenue is raised and how it is distributed—is urgent now. It is the one big thing we need to fix. There are many solutions, and I believe there is cross-party support for many of them. We are in the middle of dealing with a pandemic—in fact, no, we are hopefully near the end of dealing with a pandemic—and now is the time to reach across the aisle, to look at how we fund social care in a sustainable way and to take these things forward in a non-partisan manner.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): There will now be a time limit and I hope that Dame Diana Johnson has been told that it is six minutes—*[Interruption.]* No? Well, you know now, Dame Diana. I am sure you will be incredibly flexible with your speech. The wind-ups will begin no later than 7 o'clock.

5.4 pm

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab) [V]: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am very pleased that both the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State opened the debate by paying tribute to the vital role that local government has played in our national response on covid. I would like to personally thank all the local government officers in Hull for their amazing work over the past 12 months in supporting our community. In my view, local government must be central to any serious plan for levelling up that the Government bring forward, but sadly, in Hull over the past decade it has felt more like levelling down.

The Chancellor, who was previously so adept at locating the forest of magic money trees, has made the deliberate and calculated political decision to underfund local government by around £2 billion and to invite local councillors to make up that funding shortfall by levying a large council tax increase of up to 5%. That would be around 4% above the current rate of inflation even before the fire and police precepts were added. I find it disgraceful that the Chancellor is playing political games at a time of a national public health and economic crisis, devolving blame and not power, and yet again providing only a sticking plaster solution to the issue of social care, despite the Prime Minister's promises. As the Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), said, there was a joint report from the Health Committee and the Local Government Committee a few years ago—I was a Member of the Health Committee at the time—that set out a way forward. It is unfortunate that we still have not had a response from the Government on those very sensible proposals.

It is not just that local authorities in the poorest areas have had the deepest funding cuts since 2010. The areas that those councils represent also have the poorest families who have been hardest hit by the decade of austerity and then by the covid crisis over the past year,

as unemployment, which is always higher in those areas, has risen sharply. Many of those families are currently having to choose between heating and eating, and they simply cannot afford the large increase in council tax made in Downing Street. The council tax is a regressive tax that hits hardest the low-income working families who are just outside the scope of benefit entitlement, so a 5% council tax hike would be a major act of austerity targeted at those families at the worst of times.

In Hull, a 5%-plus council tax increase would raise little for local services such as adult social care and children's services, which are already under huge pressure; it would instead cause disproportionate misery for families who simply cannot afford any extra tax burdens at this time. Council tax increases also raise less for services in disadvantaged and deprived areas than for those in wealthier areas. A 1% council tax hike in Hull would bring in around £883,000. In the East Riding, our wealthier neighbour, that same 1% would bring in £1.7 million. So a 5% council tax increase in Hull would generate £4.4 million, but that would not close the budget gap of £13 million that Hull City Council will face in 2022-23. Given the 80-seat Tory majority, this council tax bombshell will no doubt be forced through the House tonight. It will then fall to local councillors to make the unenviable choice of whether to pass on this austerity measure made in Downing Street to low-income working families to maintain services, or to reject this austerity made in Downing Street and make further cuts to services. This puts councils between a rock and a hard place.

In conclusion, it is worth reflecting once again, in this centenary year, on the events in Poplar in 1921, when Labour borough councillors rejected the idea that the poor should keep the poor and refused to impose austerity on the poorest families. They went to prison for it. Their victory secured equalisation of the rates—a fairer system of local government finance that lasted decades, apart from a few episodes such as the poll tax, until the Tories and the Lib Dems in the 2010 coalition Government started year by year to dismantle the idea of fairer funding for poorer areas. We now face the renewed need to battle for a fairer deal for areas such as Hull and other disadvantaged areas in our country, and for funding that works for working families in those communities.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I am sorry, Dame Diana, that you were not earlier informed of the time limits. I understand that you have been, Nickie.

5.10 pm

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con) [V]: I am delighted to be able to contribute to this debate on local government finance. I declare an interest as a current local councillor, although with no executive responsibility. As a former council leader, I believe wholeheartedly in the importance of local services for local people, now more than ever. The covid-19 pandemic has clearly shown that local councils are crucial to delivering local services and prioritising local need. I pay tribute to councillors and officers up and down the country for their outstanding work, particularly over these most difficult times we are experiencing.

Westminster City Council supports and enables community volunteering through Westminster Connects, but we have all come to rely on local services, perhaps much more than ever before. I and residents in my

[Nickie Aiken]

constituency are grateful for the support that central Government have provided to local authorities to aid the response to the pandemic. Westminster received more than £29 million last year to support its crucial services, and the City of London just over £1 million. Looking forward, I understand that Westminster City Council can expect to receive almost £10 million in further covid-19 emergency funding in the coming year, and the City of London almost £300,000. Sadly, that support remains necessary.

Colleagues in Westminster City Council tell me that there has been a 10% reduction in business rate collections and a 6% reduction in council tax collections in comparison with the previous financial year. The deficit for 2020-21 is estimated to be £231 million. I welcome the increase in funding for local services included within this settlement, particularly the support it plans to offer authorities to further improve our response to rough sleeping and homelessness. I care deeply about that issue, particularly rough sleeping. One way to support local councils in this area would be to work cross-party and cross-Department to repeal and replace the outdated Vagrancy Act 1824. I am working with charities, including Crisis, St Mungo's and The Passage to present Ministers with a workable policy for updated legislation to improve the prospects of those currently living on the streets.

Much as the pandemic has highlighted many strengths in delivering local services, it has also highlighted some weaknesses. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is all too aware of the fragmented delivery of services in London. The current Mayor of London has let down local people and local authorities across the capital. I would welcome a reassessment of London devolution. Perhaps local London councils could be provided with some of the executive roles currently undertaken by City Hall.

Last year, I made my maiden speech during the debate on the local government finance report, and I highlighted then, before covid had even struck, the weaknesses I perceive in our financing of local government. The problems are systemic and chronic. Covid, I have no doubt, will be a catalyst for change in how the private sector will do business. Likewise, it should be a catalyst in the public sector. Councils remain far too dependent on central Government for support. Council tax remains a regressive tax, impacting on the poorest in our society, and it is ripe for reform.

A flat property tax to replace council tax and rates has been recently mooted. Although I certainly welcome fresh thinking on the issue, I did not agree with Jeremy Corbyn's Labour party's idea of a mansion tax, and I do not agree with a property tax either. One straightforward solution would be to give local authorities the power to introduce additional council tax bands above band H. It does not make sense that a person living in a £15 million apartment in Westminster still only pays £2,000 in council tax. An approach of having extra bands would raise much needed extra revenues.

Westminster Council's hugely successful community contribution scheme, introduced under my leadership, raised over £1 million in two years. That clearly demonstrates that people living in higher-valued properties are prepared to contribute more, and they need to be allowed to do so.

Business rate reform must also be escalated, as bricks and mortar retail suffers against online retail. Given the recent pressure of retail lockdowns, and as office workers consider their working patterns, it is inevitable that the commercial market will change. Business rates must adapt and change with the market, to support local authorities to be able to offer residents the local retail and business environment that they desire. I welcome the Government's review and stated aim of increasing parity between digital and bricks and mortar businesses. I also hope that the forthcoming Budget will announce the continuation of the business rates holiday. Reforming council tax, business rates and the whole of local government finance is vital if we are to address desperately needed reform in areas such as social care.

If you will forgive me, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to end by plagiarising the summing up of my own maiden speech a year ago. Now is the time for brave, bold reforms and for new thinking to ensure that those on the frontline in local government are given the freedoms they need and are calling out for to help their communities to thrive and to grow in a truly open, global Britain.

5.16 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab) [V]: I certainly echo the thanks that have been given to our amazing public sector workforce during the pandemic. In Salford they have been nothing short of outstanding.

The charity StepChange has found that the number of people who are in severe problem debt because of the covid crisis has risen to 1.2 million—the figure has nearly doubled since March—with a further 3 million at risk. It warns that we are facing a new and unprecedented debt crisis unless the Government implement a clear, preventive plan to tackle it.

Worse still, the Office for Budget Responsibility estimated at the time of the 2020 spending review that the number of unemployed people would hit 2.26 million by the middle of this year. Three million people have been completely excluded from any coronavirus income support, leaving them in dire financial situations. Along with proposed cuts to universal credit, this will contribute to one of the worst recessions in our economic history. I say to the Secretary of State that in effect forcing people to pay more in council tax at this time, instead of increasing the overall level of funding for local authorities, is not just morally reprehensible; it makes no economic sense, and it will not pave the way to recovery, as he says it will.

Already Salford has experienced a council tax collection deficit of £9.1 million this year, which is creating financial pressures for future budgets. The fact is that people simply do not have enough money to pay for it. There is also a £19.3 million budget deficit in business rate revenue due to covid-related business rate relief and a forecast reduction in rateable values. With covid alone, we have seen our budgets hammered, but the big financial damage was, sadly, inflicted by Government cuts long before covid hit.

Of course, the Government will wax lyrical about how they have provided more money to local government and ring-fenced pots of money for social care and covid, but that is not strictly true. At least 12 authorities that are in or around a section 114 position—the equivalent of bankruptcy for local authorities—are in talks with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local

Government. Indeed, Richard Watts, the chair of the resources board of the Local Government Association, said on Monday that

“councils had seen a £15bn cumulative cut in their Whitehall grants since 2010.”

Also since 2010, £211 million has been taken out of Salford’s revenue budget—that is 53% of core funding from central Government being taken away from the city of Salford.

Despite all that, and in the face of such adversity, we have one of the most forward-thinking and progressive councils in the UK. The council has stretched every sinew and dipped into its reserves to set out a no-cuts budget this year. But that is just to break even. For Salford, as the UK’s 18th most deprived authority and seeing cuts 35% worse than the national average, forced increases in council tax and no commitment from the Government to increase the overall level of funding that we receive, the future is not just uncertain but unsustainable. This is not the levelling up that we were promised; it is levelling down.

Let me be clear to the Secretary of State: his proposals are not some grand Government efficiency project to streamline our public services and provide us with local revenue-generating powers; they will exacerbate regional inequality, cause further financial misery for people across Salford and steal from their future. His proposals steal the right to decent services, steal the right to a vibrant local economy and steal the right to decent social care. What we need from the Secretary of State today is Government funding, not austerity by stealth.

5.21 pm

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con) [V]: I thank the Government for the assistance that they have given to Cornwall to fund many aspects of life throughout what has been an incredibly difficult time. Much has been given through Cornwall Council, and I thank those who have redistributed Government funds to the people of Cornwall. I also thank the hard-working council staff at Cornwall Council who have done so much during this pandemic.

However, I have a few concerns. First, there is the curious case of Cornwall’s embassy in Brussels. I find it frankly bizarre that hard-working Cornish taxpayers, who are in many cases struggling because of the pandemic, are funding an office in the heart of the EU. I know that the Liberal Democrats, who form the administration with the Independents, did not agree with our leaving the EU, but I remind them that in 2016 Cornwall voted to leave, and last year this Government got Brexit done.

Secondly, I understand that the new IT systems are over budget and that a massive amount of money has been spent on licences that were not even needed.

Thirdly, I am concerned about the many millions being spent on consultants. I understand that the amount spent has increased massively in recent years, and worry that we are paying people to talk about issues rather than focusing on delivering.

When I was in local government in Cornwall, one of the first questions I always asked—as I do now, as an MP—was, “Can you give me a timeline for delivery?” I want to see a council that actually gets things done. The Cornish people are the ultimate arbiters of who can best target the resources for Cornwall, and they will have that opportunity in May.

I thank the Government for the resource that they have given to Cornwall during this incredibly difficult time. I also thank the Prime Minister for choosing Cornwall as the location for the G7 summit and look forward to the best economic benefit that it will bring to Cornwall.

5.24 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab) [V]: I begin by paying tribute to the hard work and dedication of Wirral Council workers and Wirral Council throughout the pandemic.

Sadly, financial challenges are nothing new to our local councils. More than a decade of Conservative Government austerity has put immense pressure on our local authorities and pushed many of the services that we all rely on to near breaking point. According to the Special Interest Group of Municipal Authorities, Wirral Council has had its spending power reduced by £124 million, or 30%, since 2010-11. The authority was in a position in which it had to save around £40 million next year, and it has recently been forced to consult on difficult proposals that impact on public services because of the Government’s austerity measures. Other councils up and down the country have also found themselves in extremely difficult positions because of the Government’s actions. In addition—and as a result of the pandemic and measures to combat it—councils around the country face huge financial uncertainty over the next few years and into the foreseeable future.

It is therefore a matter of real concern that the Government have given no clarity over funding levels after March 2022. As the Local Government Association has called for and as council officers in Wirral have emphasised to me, it is vital that the Government provide a multi-year settlement in 2022-23 to put councils on a long-term and sustainable footing. Ministers must also demonstrate meaningful progress towards a solution to the funding crisis in adult social care. Hidden in the fine print of the Chancellor’s November spending review was an assumption that councils would raise council tax by up to 5%. Surely the Chancellor must have been aware that such a move would place a significant financial burden on households, particularly those in hardship, in a year of economic uncertainty.

Our country has had the worst recession of any major economy, and families up and down the country are already worried about paying the bills and putting food on the table. A decade of irresponsible choices by the Conservatives has had an impact on household finances, even before covid hit. A quarter of UK households went into the covid-19 crisis with less than £100 in their bank; 3.6 million people were trapped in insecure work; and the UK was one of the most unequal countries in Europe. To make matters worse, the Government plan to cut universal credit by £1,000 a year, despite campaigning by Labour and numerous charities on this issue. In November last year, a coalition of more than 60 organisations, including the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the Child Poverty Action Group and the Trussell Trust, said that this cut would be “a terrible mistake” and that,

“The removal of this support would not only be immoral, but it will also damage the UK’s recovery” from the pandemic.

The Office for Budget Responsibility estimated at the time of the 2020 spending review that the number of unemployed people would surge to 2.6 million by the

[Margaret Greenwood]

middle of this year. For the Government to undermine council funding to such an extent that local authorities have to increase council tax to continue paying for crucial services such as adult social care is nothing short of shameful.

Ministers should address the crisis in social care and come forward with the necessary funding. It is disappointing that the public health grant for 2021-22 has still not been announced, leaving councils with yet more uncertainty. I have made this point previously in the House, but it is worth making again: the Government must increase the public health grant for next year. The Health Secretary told me in November that the Government would increase it, but that is not what the Treasury said; it said that the public health grant would simply be maintained. The Association of Directors of Public Health has said:

“In the current circumstances, and following years of cuts to public health, it is completely incomprehensible that the Government is not increasing the public health grant”

to local authorities next year. I urge the Minister to work with colleagues across the Government to ensure that local public health teams get the funding they need to continue to meet their public health responsibilities.

In March last year, the Government told more than 300 council leaders that they stood ready to do

“whatever is necessary to support councils in their response to COVID-19.”

However, they later backtracked and said that councils would not be fully reimbursed for costs during a pandemic and that they should not

“labour under a false impression that what they are doing will be guaranteed funded by central government”.

This is a complete betrayal of our communities and the councils that serve them by the Government at this extraordinarily difficult time. Instead of putting councils in the position of having to increase council tax, the Government should stand by their pledge to do whatever is necessary to support councils and give them the funding they need to run local services. The Government should also give local authorities the confidence that they need to plan ahead in these desperately uncertain times by giving them clarity over longer-term funding.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): We now go via videolink to Ian Liddell-Grainger. [Interruption.] Ian, have you got a jacket, please? You should have a jacket. We will pause briefly while the jacket is put on. Thank goodness we cannot see below the jacket.

5.29 pm

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): I apologise unreservedly to you for that, Mr Deputy Speaker. That was a very stupid faux pas that I made, and I apologise to you and the House for that piece of stupidity.

I would like to bring to the House’s attention some of the problems we are facing here. As all colleagues have done, I thank so many of my local council workers for the remarkable job that they have done. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is fully aware that Somerset County Council is still misusing covid funds and its money. I have raised this matter publicly in the House, including at Prime Minister’s questions today, and I know that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is

aware of it. It pains me yet again to tell the Secretary of State that his Department has misled the Prime Minister, and I find that very hard to say.

The leader of Somerset County Council wrote to the Prime Minister, hoping to refute my criticism. The Prime Minister checked back with the Ministry and the Secretary of State and was told that Somerset always gives any information that is required. The sad truth, however, is that the Ministry did not even ask for details. It simply does not add up to look at the total spending from every council without having a clue how the grants are used.

Somerset County Council has the most appalling reputation for financial management. It has applied to the Secretary of State to become a new unitary authority. Those plans are fiercely opposed by all four districts, which have acted impeccably throughout, giving up-to-date information and dealing with grants superbly. A large majority of the elected councillors throughout the area, regardless of party, have said that to have the county running everything is not a workable solution.

Today at Prime Minister’s questions, I asked the Prime Minister to reiterate that the people of Somerset need a proper referendum. I think I got the clear impression that he was very sympathetic, so I was horrified to learn that the Ministry intends to use an online survey instead. I had a look at Citizen Space, as it is called. Anybody from anywhere can fill in a Citizen Space survey; there is no verification. Someone could log in, dare I say it, from Beijing or Moscow. It is wide open to abuse.

I say bluntly that where finance or anything else is concerned, that is not good enough, and Somerset should not have to put up with such shoddy behaviour. The people want a referendum, because they need to be asked what they want their money to be spent on. The districts, towns and parishes want a referendum. I ask the Secretary of State not to force on a county something that it does not want.

Local government is set to have elections on 6 May, and to postpone them in Somerset would look absurd and shoddy. The Cabinet Office has already included Somerset on the election list. It is up to the Secretary of State to sort this out. I hope that he does not put a spanner in the works, because Somerset ultimately needs to be put back together. I have said time and again that the county needs to be rebuilt. The system that we have at the moment will not work, because unfortunately the county does not care and does not listen to what the local people want. That has been proven time and again. The Secretary of State needs to have a conversation with the Members of Parliament and with the parishes, rather than just finding some clever way to get around it, because the situation is not acceptable.

I have been through the same thing once already with Taunton Deane, where the Government went from completely controlling the council to having two councillors left. People are not fooled. They understand money, they understand abuse of power and they understand when people are not doing what they want them to do. I say this to the Secretary of State: this is a chance to step up to the mark and to be listened to. He should listen to the people and not just presume that he can put in a civil servant, who will talk to the fire brigade based in Exeter, the police based in Bristol and then say, “Well, we will talk to others as we so wish.” The local enterprise partnership and its chief executive officer are based in Exeter. The chairman is a very well-known man and

does a great job. At the end of the day, I worry enormously about what is going on with this entire situation, so I ask the Secretary of State to please think again when it comes to the funding of local government.

5.35 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab) [V]: I declare an interest as a vice-president of the Local Government Association.

Let me start by paying tribute to my local councils, Lambeth and Southwark, for the work that they have been doing to support local residents and deliver essential services over the past year. It has been an incredibly challenging time, but our local councils have been on the frontline of the coronavirus response, delivering emergency help and support at the same time as the need for many core services has also increased.

I pay particular tribute to Lambeth and Southwark council staff for their tireless work. Many frontline staff are from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds and have continued to work on the frontline, despite knowing that they are at increased risk. Many are also parents who have been juggling their work, delivering services while home-schooling young children. I pay tribute to them for their commitment and public service at this very difficult time.

Our councils have also stepped up to meet needs where the Government have failed, particularly in relation to effective contact tracing and the provision of laptops for children struggling to access online learning. The Government promised councils that the additional costs incurred in responding to the coronavirus pandemic would be covered. Our councils took that commitment in good faith and incurred the costs that were necessary to support local residents, but they have been badly let down by this Government.

Councils across the country, including Lambeth and Southwark, are heading into the new financial year millions of pounds short of the funding they need. Councils have faced a triple whammy of additional costs arising from the pandemic and increased pressure on some existing services. They have faced a loss of income arising from the business rates holiday and the wider pressures on household incomes affecting council tax receipts and a loss of funding from fees and charges as local facilities such as swimming pools have had to close. Southwark Council has recently calculated that the additional costs of the coronavirus pandemic, combined with the loss of income over the past year, amount to £100 million.

After the additional Government measures, Southwark still has a shortfall of £23 million. That is the amount of the Government's broken promise. The approach to this funding settlement exemplifies the Government's lack of regard for local government and the vital role that it plays. Our local councils have seen more than a decade of cuts, which, in Lambeth and Southwark, has reduced their grant from central Government by more than 60%. The same public servants who have stepped up to respond to the coronavirus pandemic had already been stretched to breaking point by relentless austerity.

The public will not be fooled by the Government's announcement of one-off single-year pots of money, which are sticking plasters on the gaping hole in local government finance. Forcing councils to increase council tax, a regressive tax that hits low-income residents

hardest, does not raise anything approaching the level of funding that our councils need and is a very cynical approach.

Central to the challenges facing local government is the Government's shameful neglect of adult social care. The need for social care reform and a new sustainable funding model has been clear for the whole of the decade that the Tories have been in power, but they have done nothing about it. The funding deficit in social care has been quantified many times. A total of £3 billion is needed just to meet current needs. The failure to come forward with practical proposals for social care reform and to publish the long promised White Paper means that 1.5 million people who are in need of care receive nothing and many more do not receive the level of support they need or, indeed, the level of support that any one of us would wish for our loved ones. Thousands of care staff are paid less than the living wage. Social care is the forgotten frontline of the coronavirus pandemic, left unprotected without personal protective equipment, while the Government allowed covid-positive patients to be discharged into care homes.

As a co-chair of the all-party party group on adult social care and a former member of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, I can confirm that there has been no lack of cross-party work on social care reform. That social care has been neglected and council finances stretched to breaking point as a result is the Tories' responsibility alone. The Government's approach to local government can be summarised as "Cut the funding and devolve the blame". Our councils and our communities deserve far better than Tory cuts, cynical blame and regressive tax rises. I urge the Government to think again, and to scrap the regressive council tax hike, bring forward proposals for the reform of social care and provide sustainable funding for our councils to deliver the services our communities rely on.

5.40 pm

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con) [V]: I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, particularly my roles as a vice-president of the Local Government Association and as a serving councillor.

I have listened intently to the remarks that have been made during the debate, and I think we need to reflect on the fact that local government finance has been on a journey over many decades, as Governments of all parties have sought reform and efficiency with varying results. My first ever council tax fixing meeting saw the last Labour administration in the London Borough of Hillingdon proposing a 14.8% council tax rise—not untypical under the Labour regime in the late 1990s—with £60 million of unspecified efficiency savings, in a budget described at the time as legal only for the duration of the meeting at which it was set. Labour Members do need to reflect, when commenting on this, that they are past masters of the art of putting up local taxes. In that case, Labour funnelled money to northern authorities, rather than ensuring an equitable distribution of funding, which the revised funding formula that the Government have brought forward seeks to achieve.

The big challenges remain, and in particular I would highlight the differential impact and the differential benefit that we see from council tax rises. If we look at

[David Simmonds]

London alone, there are 33 authorities with essentially the same set of responsibilities, governed by statute, to the residents. However, because of the different proportions of budgets that are raised by council tax, the amount that the maximum possible social care precept, if applied, would raise in one of those authorities is, at one end, an additional 0.2% of resource and, at the highest end, an additional 1.8%. That is because we see a variation between the around 90% and the around 10% of funding being reached through the council tax, with the rest coming from other sources. So it is very clear, and I very much agree with the remarks that have been made during the debate, that council tax is not a long-term and sustainable solution to the challenge of social care funding.

It is also clear that the solutions are likely to be local. One of the key lessons I have seen in the course of the covid pandemic—and this is true throughout the world—is that strong local services have been crucial in saving lives and mitigating the impact on communities. The UK would do well, for the purposes of its future resilience, to emulate places that have highly autonomous, devolved local authorities that have made good decisions over many decades, meaning that they were in a good position to support their residents when a crisis of this nature hit. So we need to be thinking as a Parliament, in my view, about which are those things that we most effectively do at the centre and which are those things that we need to finance but we believe are most effectively done locally.

I would particularly like to associate myself with the remarks of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State in opening this debate. It is clear that councils have done a remarkable job in supporting residents, and perhaps almost uniquely across the public sector, have been exceptionally efficient and effective in knowing their communities and ensuring that the resources, whether from central Government or locally raised, have got to the sharp end.

As we consider the local government finance position today, we need to reflect on a decade that began with a council tax freeze grant—councils being encouraged with extra resources to freeze council tax and have no rise at all—and ended with a position where 85% of the extra resources that become available as a result of these initiatives will be financed through rises in council tax. We need to ensure that these local authorities, which have a very strong and very clear democratic mandate—for the most part led by exactly the sort of people all our communities want to see more of in politics, and by people who are more trusted than we are as Members of Parliament to make decisions in the local interest—have genuine autonomy and control over those things for which they are responsible and are properly resourced for doing those things that we in this House have decided we will require them to do. That is clear from the feedback that I have had from across London. I draw Members' attention to the London Councils finance report, which highlighted that the grant for covid costs provided by the Department is likely to meet those costs pretty much in full, and that was very much welcomed. That also reflects the efficiency of local authorities and their ability to get the money to the sharp end.

Although it is absolutely right that the Government have made additional resources available, they have capitalised on local authorities' knowledge of their communities and their ability to find people who may be reluctant to have a vaccination, identify communities that they need to get into because they need extra support and help, and redeploy staff from libraries and all sorts of different services to do the door-knocking for test, track and trace. Those are the people who have unequivocally stepped up to the plate and gone beyond what is required during this crisis.

As we go beyond this one-year settlement, welcome as many of its provisions are, we need to ensure that we properly reflect on how we sustain those services for the future. We must move away from the annual wrangling between Government and local government; each needs a much more settled view of what the other's role is and of how we will finance it for the long term. The settlement that is to be voted on today is most definitely an important step in the right direction, and I very much welcome it, but it is clear that we need to find a different way of formulating that relationship for the long-term future and the good of our communities.

5.46 pm

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): Before coming to this place, I had the privilege of sitting as a Conservative councillor in Durham unitary authority and Darlington Borough Council, which cover my Sedgefield constituency, and as such I fully understand the importance of these settlements. I declare an interest: due to the delayed elections I am still a councillor in both, although I decline the allowances and I have no executive responsibility.

In recent years, there has been a clear apprehension in both councils, as the settlements were due to be announced, about what level of savings would be required and whether they would get their fair share. I am in regular discussions with Durham and Darlington councils, and I have been pleased to observe the extra support delivered this year—£147 million extra has been received between them since March. Their natural pessimism has proved unfounded. I applaud both councils for the speed with which they delivered the Government support to the point of need. I thank the outstanding volunteers and council employees throughout the constituency for standing up and supporting their residents.

For both councils, a longer-term settlement needs to be delivered as soon as practicable. They fully understand the exceptional circumstances that have frustrated things this year, but they reiterate the need to give longer planning horizons as soon as possible. When the longer-term settlements are determined, I ask that a review of the metrics for future funding be undertaken, because I find it very difficult to understand, for example, why a county such as Durham, which covers 223,000 hectares, is not classed as rural. It is that sort of conundrum that underpins concerns about whether the fair funding review and the shared prosperity fund will reach my communities as they should. I remain perplexed about why the Labour-controlled Durham County Council is to spend £50 million on a new county hall in the centre of Durham. In my opinion, it would be better if it remained where it is.

I have concerns that the push towards local council tax funding will disproportionately affect communities where the underlying affordability is poorer and the demand for adult social care is typically higher. I ask

the Minister to incorporate that consideration into his evaluation of future funding models, and potentially look for a different model to support adult social care.

One of the biggest concerns for my authorities is the lack of understanding by Whitehall officials of what our reality is. That is why I believe it is particularly important that the proposed relocation of Departments, whether the Treasury, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government or any other Department, is not to another metropolitan centre. If officials and Ministers are to fully understand the world outside our cities, they need to get up close and see them. There is nowhere better than the Tees Valley Mayor's proposed location of Teesside.

I welcome the Government's settlements this year and their plans to level up and build back better. I see initiatives such as the fair funding review and the levelling-up fund as critical pillars in the delivery of those plans, and I hope that the future funding of our local government allows it to play its full part.

5.49 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con) [V]: My comments will be made from the perspective of county areas, and I provide them both as an MP in the county of Suffolk and as chairman of the county all-party party group. It is to be welcomed that the Government have listened to the concerns of county councils, including Suffolk County Council, and the County Councils Network, and have used the local government funding settlement to provide further funding to councils in recognition of the additional cost pressures they have absorbed as part of their response to covid-19, at a time when the pandemic is also putting enormous strain on their income. That said, there is a significant funding gap that predates the pandemic and remains like an elephant in the room, which the settlement has not addressed. This can be properly tackled only by completing the fair funding review.

Shortly before the announcement of the spending review and the provisional settlement, the County Councils Network, representing 36 English local authorities serving county areas, published the results of its autumn budget survey. It showed that for 2021-22 only one in five of its member councils were confident that they could deliver a balanced budget this coming year without dramatic reductions to services. In that context, the settlement and the further announcement that the Secretary of State has made today are to be welcomed, as they head off this nightmare and provide some certainty by ensuring a roll-over of all existing grants for councils, alongside some additional resources to meet the underlying pressures on council budgets that predated the impact of covid-19. However, this is only temporary respite; councils still face a significant funding gap that they will need to close next year.

The local tax income guarantee scheme is to be welcomed, as it provides essential support for local authorities suffering losses in tax income in 2020-21. As a result, councils will be able to deliver balanced budgets in 2021-22, without dramatic reductions to services. However, it must be pointed out that the scheme is less favourable for council tax losses than for losses in business rates. As county councils receive a much higher share of council tax income compared with their share of business rates income, they will be disadvantaged.

This settlement gets us through an incredibly challenging and highly unusual time for local government, but it does not address that elephant in the room: the funding gap that predated the pandemic. It can be tackled only by implementing the fair funding review, which has the potential to deliver fairer settlements for councils all around the council, be they rural or metropolitan, be they from the north, the south, the west or the east, and for coastal communities such as Lowestoft and Waveney. I therefore urge the Minister to confirm in his summing up that a final consultation and indicative allocations under the new formula will be published this year, in 2020-21, so that the review can be implemented in 2022-23.

5.54 pm

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in the debate. I want to start in the same way that many others have, in my case by thanking Lancashire County Council and Burnley Borough Council for all they have done to support our local residents to get through covid, from providing social care to our most vulnerable residents and working with businesses to get them covid-secure through to administering so many of the Government's support schemes, which have proved essential to keeping our economy going. While not everything they do is in the public's sight—lots of it is behind the scenes—it is essential none the less.

Unfortunately, some of the lines coming from the Labour party in this debate are simply untrue. Labour's approach to funding seems to resemble that of Goldilocks—it does not matter what is done, how much is provided or what the scheme looks like; it is never quite right. I made a promise to the people of Burnley and Padiham that I would bring Government focus and Government investment, and this funding settlement and the broader actions that the Government are taking demonstrate that that is exactly what we are doing. This Government are laser-focused on levelling up and tackling covid-19.

In the last year alone, more than £11 billion has been provided to local authorities. That includes more than £50 million to Burnley Borough Council and £141 million to Lancashire County Council for nothing other than covid. Let me break that funding down, because it has helped residents, businesses and families. Just for Burnley, that is £34.27 million of total grant funding for businesses; £1.48 million of council tax hardship funding; £11.1 million of business rates relief; £95,000 for domestic abuse services; £114,000 of self-isolation grant funding; £100,000 for a community champion, announced just the other week; £350,000 for compensation for lost income from car parking charges and so on; £78,000 for reopening high streets—the list goes on.

Then there is an extra £2.11 million of funding for the council's day-to-day services that have been impacted by covid-19—for example, refuse collection and green spaces. That is not to mention the extra £2 million that the Prime Minister announced for Pioneer Place in Burnley town centre as one of his shovel-ready schemes—something the local Labour council likes to avoid mentioning. Does that sound like a council that is seeing Government funding withheld? Does it sound like a Government who are going back on their promise to do whatever it takes? I do not think it does. That approach continues into next year, which is evident from the finance settlement that we are debating.

[*Antony Higginbotham*]

My Labour council leader likes to claim that it is never enough. He was in the press just the other day saying, “We’ve had an increase, but—”. Well, there is no “but”. If we add up all the funding that I just spoke about, it translates to £24 per capita in Burnley—£24 per person to deal with covid-19. That is in addition to the core grant that the Government give the council for its day-to-day services and the income it gets from council tax. In comparison, the national average is £15 for a typical district or borough council—£24 for Burnley and £15 on average.

I will never stop lobbying the Government and standing up in the House to ask for more support for Burnley, and those on the Government Front Bench know that. I will work with whatever administration we have in Burnley town hall, but we have to focus on the facts, and the facts show us that this Government are providing the support needed. Core spending power going into next year will be higher than it is this year. That is not a Government who are taking money away; it is a Government who are supporting residents across Burnley and Padiham. None of us should apologise for trying to ensure value for money in town halls. Every penny spent in a town hall is money raised through either council tax or general taxation, but it all comes from the same pot—it all comes from the same local residents and local businesses that work day in, day out to earn that money.

We need a bit more transparency. If local authorities are going to raise council tax, they need to be much clearer about why they are doing it, particularly if they are inserting that “but” at the end: “We have had more funding from Government, but—”. That “but” tells us that they want to increase council tax, so residents should feel free to write to their local councillors and say, “What is it that you need the extra money for that isn’t being provided for by Government?” The answer cannot always be more tax rises. We have to squeeze every penny and pound out of the money we give to our local authorities. That is what our residents deserve.

5.59 pm

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con) [V]: After 28 years of hard Labour in Darlington, with ever-increasing council tax, ever-decreasing quality of services, our arts centre closed, daft traffic management experiments and our precious Crown Street library under threat, in May 2019 the people of Darlington voted for change. The new Conservative-led administration has reversed the traffic experiment, saved the library, putting it in the hands of trustees, and made sure that our town is much cleaner than it has been in a very long time.

Throughout 2020, Darlington really stepped up to the plate, rolling out community testing, dispatching Government grants quickly, and now providing call centre support to the vaccine effort. I must record my thanks to everyone at Darlington Borough Council for their amazing efforts—every street sweeper, every administrator and every leisure team member who has taken on new roles. This help has been enabled, in part, thanks to the swift provision of funds from Government, which has enabled local authorities like mine to truly serve their communities, together with the prudent financial management of a Conservative-led council like Darlington’s that has this year balanced its books.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and Ministers have worked quickly with councils to ensure that they have the resources to support those affected by the virus, including the much-appreciated covid winter grant helping families with food and bills at this time of need. The Government have already provided £8 billion directly to relieve financial pressures during the pandemic. It is right that the local government finance settlement for 2021-22 reflects fresh challenges as we emerge from the pandemic. I am delighted that local government will receive an extra £2.3 billion, including a £300 million boost to the social care grant, bringing total core funding to £51.2 billion, with Darlington Borough Council set to see an increase in core spending power from £88.2 million to £92.5 million.

Putting a freeze on the business rates multiplier is a welcome move for local businesses. Keeping it at 49.9p will alleviate some concerns, and I am relieved that central Government have committed to make up the shortfall, but in the long term our business rates system does need reform.

For all top-tier local authorities, adult social care and children’s social care remains one of the biggest responsibilities they have in providing the care that many of our youngest and oldest vulnerable citizens depend on. This is important in addressing the issues facing local government and our society. Social care requires a serious debate about how we fund it into the future, without petty point-scoring stifling discussion.

The challenges of our high street, with the shift to online shopping, demand a discussion of how we raise the money needed in a fair way that does not discourage investment in our high streets. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has done an incredible job in supporting businesses in Darlington through furlough and the self-employment scheme, alongside the continued commitment to the investment in our mainline station. Indeed, having set out how great Darlington is, with its excellent Conservative-led authority, and echoing the words of my hon. Friend and neighbour the Member for Sedgfield (Paul Howell), I firmly hope that the Chancellor will consider us as a location for Treasury North.

In thanking the Chancellor, I must also thank my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the £23.3 million under the towns fund, which will help us to rejuvenate our town and establish our railway heritage quarter—the real home of Locomotion No. 1. We look forward to the levelling-up fund and the opportunity to bid for more funds that will help us to fulfil the Prime Minister’s ambition of a truly one-nation country. This finance settlement is welcome and will help us to bounce back. I know the people of Darlington welcome the support that we have had and continue to have.

6.4 pm

Imran Ahmad Khan (Wakefield) (Con) [V]: During this past year, Her Majesty’s Government have provided unprecedented support to businesses and individuals who have struggled throughout the pandemic. All councils throughout the United Kingdom have received vast support from the Conservative central Government to help them to meet their responsibilities and the challenges brought on by covid-19.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, Her Majesty’s Government have provided more than £8 billion directly to support local government throughout England and

to help to relieve some of the pressures that local services have faced and continue to face. In March 2020, a £500 million hardship fund was announced for councils to help people through council tax relief. In May, £600 million was announced for local authorities through the infection control fund to help to assist care homes.

I fully support the motion on the local government finance report 2020-21 and welcome the fact that local government is receiving an increase of £2.3 billion in spending power for the upcoming financial year. Our local services will continue to suffer from the repercussions of the pandemic for a long time after the last vaccine has been administered; this financial settlement ensures that key services can continue to operate despite the ravages of covid-19.

I have heard Labour criticise the local government finance settlement for the next financial year and suggest that the funding relies solely on increases in council tax. It is crucial to point out that it is Labour-controlled councils that are widely characterised by spending money and employing resources in an imprudent and often chaotic manner that, quite predictably but lamentably, frequently results in deficits, for which the poor taxpayer must ultimately pay and suffer.

In my constituency of Wakefield, Labour-controlled Wakefield Metropolitan District Council has overseen a deterioration of our once great and proud city. In 2008, the council pushed through plans for a multimillion-pound market hall. The city's market traders and residents did not want it, and it has lost an average of £190,000 a year and been largely shut to business. And that is only the cost to the council: our market town, which has roots in the medieval days, has almost entirely died.

In July, in the midst of the pandemic, Wakefield Metropolitan District Council attempted to shut the major thoroughfare of Northgate in the heart of the city of Wakefield, which would have destroyed any chance that local businesses had to recover from the first lockdown. Thankfully, for the first time in 89 years the people of Wakefield had not a Labour MP but a Conservative to represent them and listen to them. Together, we made the council listen to the people and businesses of Wakefield, who had felt ignored and poorly served for too long.

The increase in spending power does not have to equate to an increase in taxes. Where there are deficiencies, waste or profligate overspending, rectifications should be made to ensure the most effective and efficient allocation of resources. The increase in local government spending power will ensure that vital services can continue. However, councils should not immediately seek to increase taxes, but rather examine their own spending patterns to ensure that taxpayers get the best services possible for as low a cost as possible.

In short, local governments work best and serve their residents best when they are run by Conservatives, characterised by belief and pride in their communities, faith groups and families and, of course, their local communities and their country.

6.9 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con) [V]: There is no doubt about the vital role that our local councils have played in supporting our country and the communities they serve through this pandemic. The

Government have recognised that by providing unprecedented levels of financial support to councils. Cornwall Council alone has received more than £555 million from the Government to support its work, businesses, communities and households over the past year. I welcome this local government financial settlement, the Government's continued support to local councils and, indeed, the increase in funding for our councils.

I have listened carefully to the debate, and I am somewhat puzzled by much of what we have heard from those on the Opposition Benches. They criticise the Government for not providing more funding for local authorities, and at the same time they criticise them for allowing councils to increase council tax, as though money that comes from central Government is somehow free money. Well, I have news for everyone: it is all taxpayers' money, whether it comes from centrally raised or locally raised taxes. We will certainly take no lessons from the Labour party, under which we saw council tax double the last time it was in government.

Of course, it is not just about the amount of money councils get; how they spend it is just as important. Councils need to ensure that they provide value for money to taxpayers and that their funding is focused on the core services that matter most to local people. Sadly, Cornwall Council continues to show that it is unable to do that. All too often, there are examples of how the current administration continually complains that it needs more money from central Government but then seems always to find the money for its own priorities, which regrettably do not always reflect those of the people it is meant to be serving.

My hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) has already highlighted the tens of thousands of pounds the council wastes every year on continuing to maintain an office in Brussels, even though we voted to leave the EU five years ago. However, most shocking of all is possibly the recent revelation that Cornwall Council paid a staggering £20 million to consultants last year. That is more than double the sum that it spent in 2017-18 and amounts to more than £400,000 a week, every week. I struggle to imagine what could possibly need so many consultants to be paid so much Cornish taxpayers' money. To date, the administration has failed to explain who has been paid the money and for what possible reason. Paying that much money to consultants is bad enough, but when we factor in the fact that in 2020 Cornwall Council had the highest number of officers being paid over £100,000 a year in the south-west, we wonder why it needs all those highly paid consultants as well as 19 officers receiving over £100,000.

Many people are also concerned that the council will use the impact of the past year to further reduce the face-to-face services it provides and to cut back on its physical presence in our towns. Despite being told by the administration that having staff working from home is more efficient, we have seen a reduction in the level of services. One specific issue is the time it takes for local conveyancing searches to be completed. In recent months, it has been taking over 10 weeks for searches to be returned, which has caused no end of stress and anxiety to homebuyers. When challenged as to why it has taken so long, the council blamed the pandemic and the impact of staff working from home. Yet, at the same time, it tells us that it is more efficient for staff to work from home. It cannot have it both ways. I ask the

[Steve Double]

Minister to confirm that we expect councils to reopen their face-to-face services and get staff back in their offices as soon as it is safe to do so. Can we also look at what we can do about the delay in local searches? This is clogging up the housing market at a time when hundreds of people are seeking to complete before the end of the stamp duty holiday.

Finally, it would be remiss of me not to mention the need for the fair funding review to be completed. It has been well established that the cost of delivering services in rural areas is higher than it is in urban centres. The Government recognised this through the rural services delivery grant. I thank the Secretary of State for the extension of the grant, but we have been waiting for the fair funding review for too long now. As we emerge from this pandemic there is an urgent need to review the way in which councils are funded, particularly in rural areas, that recognises the additional costs that rural councils face and to ensure that a fit-for-purpose formula is in place. For too long, we have said that the warped funding formula created by the previous Labour Government that favours urban councils and sees them receive a disproportionately high level of funding needs to be addressed. Will the Minister make this an urgent priority in the coming months, so that we can make sure that a fair formula is in place ahead of next year?

6.15 pm

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con) [V]: Let me start by saying what an incredible job the people who work on the frontline of our local council services are doing. That includes Warrington's binmen, social workers and environmental health teams—local people who have been supporting communities across Warrington South throughout the pandemic. I want to put on record my thanks for their efforts, because the last few times that I have spoken about the decisions taken by elected Labour councillors in Warrington, they have suggested that I am criticising the frontline efforts of the hard-working people who deliver our services. To be clear, those brilliant public sector workers have stepped up to support the most vulnerable people when they have needed it, and I thank them for their efforts.

In recent weeks, as well as dealing with the impact of covid-19, our council workers have dealt with the fallout of Storm Christoph, with more than 700 homes flooded across the town, affecting homes in Dallam, Sankey Bridges and Lymm. There is no doubt that the challenge of dealing with the floods will be costly, and I am keen for the Secretary of State to look at how central Government can assist locally.

Let me turn to local government finances. I thank the Government for the assistance that they have given to local authorities. During the current year, Warrington Borough Council has received £102 million from central Government, including support for businesses in our town. It is worth breaking that down: £32 million in business rates relief; £15.5 million pounds in additional un-ringfenced support for the council; £1.6 million in council tax hardship funding; £1.14 million for test and trace; £4.76 million for infection control; £400,000 for emergency accommodation funding; and £580,000 for the covid winter grant scheme to help fund families and those on free school meals during the holidays. The

list goes on. The Government are backing councils with the resources that they need during this challenging period.

For the year ahead, Warrington will see a real-terms increase in its spending power of 4.5%. There is an additional £6.7 million for Warrington Council, but, quite rightly, it is down to local councillors to decide how much they want to raise in council tax each year. They are elected and they hold the tax-raising powers.

Let us just go back to 2015-16, long before covid hit. The average council tax band D property in Warrington was paying £1,206 a year. The average band D figure for 2021-22, which has just been agreed by the council, will be £1,565. That is just short of a 30% increase over the period. That is an extra £360 per household for a band D home in Warrington, before police and fire precepts are added. Under Labour in Warrington, we have seen an almost 30% increase in council tax. At the same time, some Conservative Councils are freezing council tax again. At every opportunity, Labour says that it is down to the Government that council tax has increased so significantly, but we know that that is simply not the case. Local councillors decide the services to be delivered and local levels of taxation, and Labour authorities are past masters at putting up council taxes.

In the time remaining, I will turn to a number of other concerns regarding local government finance in Warrington. As the Secretary of State will know, Warrington Borough Council's statement of accounts is yet to be signed off by the independent auditor. I refer not to the current year, which is due to end shortly, nor to the previous year, nor, for that matter, to the year before that; the statement of accounts in Warrington has not yet been signed off for 2017-18, due to an objection over a £30 million investment in Redwood Bank. Despite promises after promises, there are still technical issues as to why Grant Thornton has not signed those statements off. We do not know those technical reasons, and I have lost count of the number of times that we have had promises that the statement of accounts will be signed off.

There is increasing concern locally that public money is being used for commercial purposes and it is not being used in a transparent way. That is not a good thing. This is not a plc with shareholders; it is a local council, and the risks are borne by local people. We also have not seen the full report from the auditor who investigated the objection that was raised by a member of the public about that £30 million investment. The council could choose to make it public, but so far it has not done so.

Before Christmas I raised my concerns about the level of borrowing by the council to invest in commercial ventures. Those concerns have not gone away, with £1.3 billion borrowed, at preferential rates, to purchase commercial property, invest in an energy company and buy a solar farm. The uncertainty caused by covid confirms the need for new measures to restrict and monitor these investment activities. Analysis by the TaxPayers Alliance shows yields well below forecast for a sample of local authorities that have been down this route. There are no guarantees with any of these investments. Today we may well find that there are no shortfalls in income in Warrington, but there are no guarantees as we navigate our way through the rocky times ahead. They will continue to deliver and ultimately it is down to ratepayers, who will end up footing the bill for underperforming portfolios.

Perhaps one of the most frustrating elements of the level of borrowing is that services such as Broomfields leisure centre in Appleton, which is in such an awful state, are not able to reopen, yet at the same time money is being spent on a superstore in Salford and a new set of council offices in Time Square—a project that was originally priced at £107 million, but finally came in at £142 million.

6.21 pm

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): I begin by paying tribute to Buckinghamshire Council, which has been working fabulously during this coronavirus crisis. The crisis has pushed MPs and the council together like never before, and that has only served to increase my admiration for its hard work, innovative spirit and creativity. I am, therefore, pleased to see the Government's proposals to make sure that councils are reimbursed for their lost income. That is a major factor for our council.

I also want to pay tribute to our local fire services. I could easily spend the time available praising the innovative work of our fire officers and local management. The way in which they have risen to the challenge of changing times has been an inspiration, and I am tremendously impressed by the professionalism of our firefighters whenever I meet them.

The particular issue that I want to air today with the House and the Minister is the problem of finance for our firefighters. In the 2020 inspection report, Buckinghamshire Fire & Rescue Service was graded as "requires improvement". One might ask why that has happened, but the report says that

"in one sense, it is highly efficient: it has an innovative deployment model which, if better funded, would be a cost-effective way of keeping people safe."

The reason that efficiency has been graded as "requires improvement" is stated clearly:

"This is fundamentally because it does not have enough money and people."

The report concludes by saying of the fire service:

"Overall, we would like to see improvements in the year ahead, but without increased funding, it is difficult to see where progress can be made."

I am confident that Ministers will feel that they have heard all of this before, but the reality is that Buckinghamshire fire service is in this position because of the outstanding calibre of its managers, who have been parsimonious with public money. In 2013-14, when they could have taken an increase of £5 a year in council tax, they did not take the money because it was not needed at the time. They were the only fire and rescue service not to exercise that option. They were trying to do the right thing, and at the time it was noted that they might need flexibility in future years. Now, as we see in the inspection report, that time has come.

I ask Ministers to work with colleagues in other Departments, including the Treasury and the Home Office, to make possible an increase in the precept for our fire services. I listened to the opening remarks of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State as he talked about safety and fairness, but my goodness don't we know in this Parliament that fire safety is one of the fundamental jobs and duties of the state? We need to make sure, since it has nowhere else to go, that Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service enjoys increased funding. That is an absolute imperative. In High Wycombe,

we need to refurbish our fire station, but we have limited ability to do that locally because of the need to convert revenue into capital spending.

In the past, I have written to several Ministers about this problem, and I rather fear, particularly having worked in government myself, that this problem is now trapped between the three Departments that I mentioned. I suspect what is needed is a multilateral meeting between someone at the Treasury, someone in MHCLG and someone in the Home Office, and I will continue to press Ministers to get their heads together on this subject. We are not going to go away, and we cannot possibly allow our local fire service to be underfunded, and for that reason I say to the House and to Ministers that we are going to keep pressing this issue.

I do not like being here today saying we need £5 a year on a band D property for fire safety, but that is less than 10p a week extra to make sure that we are properly funding our fire services. What I say to Ministers is this: imagine a situation arising where it turns out we do not have enough engines and staff when there is a major need for them. I am not willing to look back with hindsight and say I did nothing. Indeed, today I am saying to Ministers that we need to act, and very soon.

I have written to Ministers. I have pleaded with Ministers. I know that Ministers have been very busy indeed, diligently working on other priorities. I am saying to them today: please prioritise the funding of Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes fire service by putting heads together and getting that extra precept in place.

I finish by thanking Ministers, the Secretary of State and the Treasury for what they are doing overall on council tax. I am extremely pleased that our new unitary in Buckinghamshire is working so well, and in the context of just being formed through the coronavirus crisis. I am very grateful to Martin Tett, the leader of the council, to Rachael Shimmin, the chief executive and to all the officers, the council members and the council cabinet for all the work they are doing to carry our community through this crisis. It has been a real privilege working with them, and I am looking forward to doing so in the future.

6.27 pm

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I will not take up too much time. First, I thank Ministers for the excellent work they have done over covid. We on the Isle of Wight have had an additional £100 million in the course of the past year in loans and grants to support businesses and individuals, and that money has flowed pretty quickly through the Isle of Wight Council. I am very grateful to Isle of Wight chief exec, the council leader and, in fact, the entire team on the Island, who have done a great job.

I thank the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Thornbury and Yate (Luke Hall) for his attention to this matter and, indeed, the entire ministerial team, because I talk to them quite a bit on this issue. As he knows, we have been in discussions about the fair funding formula in regard to the Isle of Wight. It was mentioned in the fair funding formula review specifically as an island, in recognition of the potential additional costs, and that is the first time, as far as I can see, in modern local government history that the Isle of Wight has been recognised as an island. That is an important moment for us, and I am grateful to the Ministers who have been dealing with that, including the Chancellor when he was in a previous job.

[Bob Seely]

It is hugely frustrating that the fair funding formula has been put on hold. We completely understand the reasons why. Clearly Ministers are acting in good faith when they say they have had to put it on hold because of the covid crisis, and they will look to get back to instigating that fair funding formula as soon as possible. Having talked to the Minister just this morning, I understand why we cannot tinker with the current system. Indeed, it would probably be illegal and open to challenge if they tried to do so and apply some additional fair funding formula to the Island now. I am grateful for what the Minister agreed this morning, which was a funding package that will be used for research to be conducted by Whitehall—by his Ministry—and Isle of Wight Council to investigate the true additional costs of providing public services on the Island.

I know that the Minister is aware of the work of the University of Portsmouth, but I fully accept that, in order for the Government to make sure that they are spending taxpayers' money wisely, it is right and proper that they commission additional work. Let me remind the Minister that the University of Portsmouth found three reasons why additional costs were needed to provide public services on the Island that are of the same standard as those on the mainland. First, there is the lack of spillover of public services. For example, we cannot share a fire engine with Portsmouth until somebody designs a fire engine that can float on water, because we are separated from the mainland. Secondly, there are additional costs of providing services to communities on an island. There are not only additional transport costs, but issues arising from economies of scale, which mean that care home providers on the mainland may not necessarily want to set up on the Isle of Wight. Thirdly, there is the perceived separation factor that may prevent skilled workers from either moving to the Island from the mainland or, indeed, moving from the Island to the mainland.

I am very grateful for the discussion that we had this morning and for the Minister's promise of funding. I think that it showed great diligence and also creative thinking on his part. There is one thing that I should have asked him this morning. If we show that there are additional costs, which there undoubtedly are, and those are caused by our separation by sea, and the aim of the fair funding formula is actually to be fair, will the Government give me a commitment, within reason, that, if those additional costs are identified in the research that will be done by his Department and the council, those additional costs will be met? In terms of his budget, we are not talking about large sums of money. Even a few million pounds in additional costs would be very valuable for the Isle of Wight and for our local government, which is the smallest unitary authority. I echo the words of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State who opened this debate that this is about fairness. If we cannot provide the same level of services as the mainland because of the additional costs of being an island, it is obviously important for those additional costs to be met.

I have one final point, which is partly relevant to the relationship with my right hon. Friend's Ministry, but also to that with others. If the Government want to treat the Isle of Wight as being part of the mainland, they need to provide a fixed link. We are very happy

being an island, but the dynamic of islands is different from that of the mainland. If we are given targets that effectively treat us as part of the mainland—be it for housing or for anything else—there is an understanding potentially that the Government need to connect us with the mainland. If we are not connected to the mainland, the Government need to understand that there is an island dynamic, which has an impact on us as a society but also on us economically.

For example, we have an unavoidably small hospital on the Isle of Wight. We need a hospital, because we do not have a fixed link to the mainland, but that hospital is not as economically viable as other district general hospitals, because our population size is different from that using other district general hospitals. That is just a generalised plea to this Minister and also to the Government that islands have to be treated and understood as islands. None the less, I am delighted and very grateful to the Minister for his call this morning and the agreement that we will have, I think, £50,000 to work on research to make sure that the Government are satisfied that the additional costs that we talk about on the Island are genuine and should therefore be a matter for public support.

6.33 pm

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con) [V]: Those of us who have come up through the ranks of local government know only too well that local councils decide on local increases to council tax. There are parameters to work within to protect council tax payers, but I welcome the fact that local councils make local decisions and that local democracy gives them the power to do that. It will be for them to set their council tax rates. I would be the first to say that all councils must think very hard about what they do this year, recognising the immense stresses that many constituents are under.

I thank all the staff and the officers at Norfolk County Council and North Norfolk District Council for all they have been doing during the pandemic. It is a pleasure to work so closely with so many of them. What the Government propose here with a core spending power increase of 4.6% in cash terms next year is a significant step forward and is one of the larger increases in council funding in the past five years. This is worth an estimated additional £2.2 billion in funding for local government services. We should not underestimate the fact that the Government have already given local councils around £8 billion in extra funding for a range of services so that they can support the most vulnerable during this pandemic.

While this is only right, councils must play their part and run themselves efficiently in delivering services, not waste taxpayers' money. A well-run council should behave like a well-run business: its residents are its shareholders, and councillors are just as accountable for their decisions. Well-run councils build up reserves to ensure that they can support and weather the most difficult of challenges. This is what had happened under the Conservatives' control in North Norfolk. No one prepares for a pandemic, but to a large extent the Government have compensated councils for the additional costs they have had to bear.

It is worth noting that my local council, North Norfolk District Council, when it was Conservative-controlled put up council tax just once in seven years, but when the Liberal Democrats took control it took them just a matter of months before they increased taxes. Sadly, my

constituents have watched as the Liberal Democrat administration has wasted vast quantities of taxpayers' money on a redundancy and reorganisation programme throughout the pandemic, not to mention cancelling Conservative-initiated projects during their tenure which, as we emerge from the pandemic, would have contributed greatly to the district—over half a million pounds of local people's money wasted—while actually proposing very little themselves. It is an administration devoid of ideas, and many will tell themselves, when their council tax bills increase, how all that wasted money could so easily have been put towards softening the blow and alleviating some of the council tax rises they will have to pay.

Within this local government finance settlement, we have the largest rural services delivery grant ever—an increase of £4 million or 4.9% on last year—and this funding will be gladly received in sparsely populated rural local authorities such as mine. On that note, it has been mentioned that councils with seasonal economies like mine could be negatively affected by the structuring of the sales, fees and charges scheme, because they might receive a large proportion of their annual income in the period from April to June and this would not be reflected in the compensation they will receive through the scheme. Could the Minister update us, in his closing remarks, on what action he is going to take on this?

Everyone in society will be affected by this pandemic, and councils will be no different, but the Government have in real terms increased funding to them. Yes, local decision makers need to look hard at what they will do with the council tax, but no one can argue that the Government have not done a seismic job in giving them the very best tools to manage this pandemic.

6.37 pm

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con) [V]: It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. The funding settlement with an above inflation increase, given the circumstances and the economic pressures, particularly those of the pandemic, is very welcome to my local authority in Bromley and elsewhere. However, I hope the Minister will recognise that that ought to be the product purely of those extreme circumstances and that we should return to multi-year settlements as soon as possible—next year, I very much hope. I hope he will confirm that that is the Government's intention, and I hope that in the long run we can move beyond two to three-year settlements to perhaps three to four-year settlements to give local authorities much greater mid-term financial stability.

Within the welcome settlement, there are none the less still pressures that need to be recognised. The covid funding is very helpful to my authority and others, but of course that element was consulted on and published before we found the new variants and before the likelihood of further extensions of the lockdown. That will inevitably mean some continued recession in the economy for more months than was perhaps anticipated at the time, and that therefore means business rates are likely to be collected at much lower levels than those forecast in the settlement. Some businesses, of course, may well close permanently, sadly, and others will take longer to gear up, and of course there is uncertainty at the moment about new reliefs coming through. That, of course, means that the tax base is likely to be much lower than

was assumed for the five-year average that was taken in the settlement figure. That is affected, too, by the pause in construction that happened during the spring 2020 lockdown, which will affect new homes and other premises coming up. I do hope there will be a means of revisiting those figures in year, perhaps, or with an adjustment next year to make sure that that is properly picked up.

Bromley has noted that the slowdown in economic activity will have an effect on fee income, as well as the business rate and new homes bonus elements of the tax base. Parking fees, other fees and charges, and other commercial activities are much reduced, so local authorities' incomes will be reduced in that area as well. There is a need to monitor the situation throughout the year, and I hope that the Minister will be open to some additional financial support in year, if it is proved that the position of local authorities is becoming particularly stressed.

In relation to the various business grants, Bromley received an additional £55 million in covid-related business rate relief for 2020-21. I hope that that will be extended into 2021-22 to reflect the ongoing pressure on the broader economy.

I want to touch on adult social care, which is perhaps the biggest cost pressure for top-tier authorities such as my own. With a growing population, Bromley has the largest population of over-65s of any London borough. A one-size-fits-all approach does not work for us, and we have particular pressures that I hope the Minister will bear in mind. The real issue here is that the increase across London will not keep pace with the growing funding gap in adult and children's social care. Across London, that was estimated to be about £400 million pre-pandemic.

We have found that there is a strong interdependency between social care and NHS provision, and the two need to work together. Unless social care is properly funded and delivered, the job of the NHS is very often made harder, and it is not always possible to get people out of NHS facilities into local authority social care facilities. Of course, the substantial increases that the NHS has received in funding are still significantly more than what has been made available to adult social care within the settlement figures, even allowing for the use of the social care precept. There is a need to revisit the interdependency of the two and link the funding together. If that cannot be done this year, I hope it will be regarded as a priority for the future. I hope that the Minister will take that on board, too.

We need a better mechanism for properly and fully funding new burdens. That has always been the approach of the Conservative Government, but frequently we have found that there is a lag time in the calculation of the amount that is made available for the spending incurred by local authorities. It is important that we develop a swifter and more precise means of funding new burdens to the full extent that local authorities have to pick up the tab.

The last point I will make is that Bromley is historically a very low-cost authority—an efficient authority. That has been a problem since I sat in the Minister's place and had to deal with these matters. The system does not incentivise efficiency, of itself, in the local government financial settlement. There is no financial incentive in the system to keep unit costs low. Ours is the lowest unit cost for delivering services in London, but there is no recognition, at the moment, of historical financial efficiency.

[*Sir Robert Neill*]

If an authority has a low base to start with, it does not get rewarded for that; it can potentially be penalised, given that the system depends to a great extent on uprating.

That is an important long-term matter, and we need to start work on it straight away. I know that the Minister gets that point, and I know he has ambitions to look at the system. I hope he will bear that in mind and start work on it. Authorities such as mine are very happy to co-operate with the Department in finding ways forward from our own experience in these matters.

6.43 pm

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): I am delighted to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (*Sir Robert Neill*); my grandparents and my mother lived in his constituency for most of their lives.

I very much welcome this local government settlement. The Government have been flexible. I dare not use the word, but they have been generous in how they have responded to the recent demands caused by the pandemic, and that is certainly welcomed by me, by the public, by my constituents and by local authorities. Our local authorities are the first responders—they are the frontline—particularly in delivering services and responding to what people perceive to be the challenges on the ground.

When the coronavirus pandemic began, it was striking from my interaction with my three local authorities just how on the ball they were; they knew where the businesses were, and if they did not, they physically went out to find them to ensure that they had access to the important schemes that the Government had created to support local business finance. The Government took a wonderful stance on homelessness, which has meant that across the country, homelessness has almost ceased to exist at the moment. It was local authorities, local housing charities and trusts and support mechanisms that brought that policy into reality. I want to thank the Pilgrim Hearts Trust and the Windsor Homeless Project.

It is right that in these very challenging times, this is a one-year settlement, because any settlement beyond one year would involve speculation about the state of local government finances after that period. It is also right that the Government's policy is that, if any local authority wants to increase its council tax rates, it needs to take that to the people to get their consent. Overall, I congratulate the Government on their flexibility and their approach during these really trying times.

I have three local authorities in my constituency, and I want to briefly focus on two. The Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead has pretty much the lowest council tax in the entire country outside London boroughs, and Bracknell Forest Council is pretty close behind it. I want to say a big thank you to Duncan Sharkey and Tim Wheadon, who run those local authorities, and, in particular, Andrew Johnson, whose behaviour has been commendable in leading the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead.

We have not only the lowest council tax in the country but the highest-rated services in both Bracknell Forest and the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead. We have fabulous state schools, with a particular focus in Bracknell Forest on special educational needs, and the local authorities are managing them incredibly well, to ensure that our young people are very well taken care of.

It is, I would argue, the most beautiful constituency in the country, and again, that is largely thanks to the local authorities. The green spaces, public spaces and parks and gardens are incredibly well maintained in a very cost-effective manner.

Our town centres were amazing before last year, particularly Windsor town centre, with its café culture, castle, massive hospitality sector and lots of tourist attractions. The commercial focus of the local authorities has been on developing commercial and retail properties, so that the council tax payer is subsidised by those commercial activities to a degree and people keep their jobs, which in the current circumstances means that they keep their homes. That is a wise approach. Parking has been improved immensely. We still have weekly bin collections. Quite often the only thing that people recognise as coming from local authorities is that their bins are collected, so it is really important to try to keep it that way. Despite the challenges with adult social care budgets, our care homes are some of the best run in the country and had the fastest response in the current climate.

Business rates are a challenge. It is good that a large proportion of the rates is retained locally, to keep down council tax, serve residents and ensure that businesses and the local authority can thrive. However, it is a challenge, particularly in the pandemic, because we do not know how much of the business rates or the commercial rents to the local authority will survive. It is important that we look at business rates, to ensure in particular that if retail is suffering on the high street, we redress the balance, potentially by increasing rates on the out-of-town warehouses of Amazon and other big online retailers. Otherwise, wonderful department stores such as Daniel of Windsor will go out of business, because people use them as a shop front to view products but then go and buy them online, enjoying the benefits of lower business rates out of town centres.

I want to flag three things with the Minister, the first of which is flooding. Sadly, the part of the lower Thames alleviation scheme that is in my constituency has not gone ahead because the local authority was not allowed to raise a flooding precept, which I think local people would have accepted because a number of houses and businesses would be protected. I ask the Minister to look at that.

The second is rewards for good behaviour. Why is it that Lib Dem and Labour local authorities that waste money on initiatives that never work out and rack up their council tax year on year get the reward of being able to increase their council tax more than careful and efficient Conservative authorities that keep council tax low because it is a percentage rate rise? I ask the Minister to have a quick look at whether there can be some mechanism for rewarding local authorities that have kept the council tax low for their residents but now find that they cannot increase it by a sufficient amount to even vaguely catch up with those reprobates in Labour local authorities across the country. With that, I would like to say thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I thank the Government for such a good settlement.

6.50 pm

Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab) [V]: Like other Members, I pay tribute to the fantastic work carried out by the staff of my local Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council authority, to enable communities to come through

this dreadful time. I also thank the communities of Blackburn, which have pulled together to support those in vulnerable situations and those who are less well off than others.

There have been some excellent contributions to this debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) spoke about the unfairness of this proposal and the failure to recognise the £5 billion pressure on councils before covid, and we also heard that from my hon. Friends the Members for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) and for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood). My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) said that this is not levelling up communities. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles, I see this as a levelling down. My hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) said that this is a regressive tax that will not fix the problems of social care. That has been a constant theme throughout this debate.

The cat is out of the bag, and the Government's plans have been exposed for what they really are. They are not giving councils additional funding to protect services; they are hiking council tax. I have serious concerns that, once again, they are mis-selling this to the public. The Conservatives are burdening the public with a £2 billion council tax bombshell, which would never had been needed if the Secretary of State had kept his promise to do whatever it takes. This council tax bombshell is central Government passing the burden over to local councils and, ultimately, to families across the country—the same people he described as heroes, hard-working and compassionate.

This rise is not only wrong; it is economically illiterate in the middle of a pandemic, and following the worst economic crisis of any major economy. The Secretary of State says that he always follows the professional advice. Well, you would struggle to find an economist who thinks that what he is doing is right, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is not the right time to hike taxes, but that is what he is proposing.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West said that, going into this crisis, a quarter of UK households had less than £100 in the bank, 3.6 million people were trapped in insecure work, and in-work poverty was at record levels. For almost a year, many families have been on reduced incomes through self-isolation and furlough, many have been excluded from any support at all, and there have been sadly too many job losses.

The Conservatives have failed to invest properly in public services. They have let high streets go to the wall and have slashed the safety net that people depend on when times get tough. The Government are going to hit people with tax rises in the middle of the pandemic. People cannot afford to loosen their purse strings. The purses are empty for many. This is an additional financial burden on top of the Chancellor's pay freezes and benefit cuts. It will blow a hole in people's pockets and, ultimately, undermine the recovery as we come out of the crisis.

With that in mind, it is all the more disappointing that the Government have broken their promise to do "whatever it takes" to support councils, as evidenced by councils of all political persuasions. I gently suggest that the hon. Member for Burnley (Antony Higginbotham) check with his council how much it received and how much the cost was. It would also be useful for him to

check how many people received no support at all—either support to self-isolate or business support. The Local Government Secretary has a good poker face to stand at that Dispatch Box and claim otherwise, because time after time the Chancellor has put the economy before public health, against the advice of the experts, and now he is coming back on economic support, when the evidence clearly shows it is still needed. As my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Steve Reed) says, the Conservatives have had no trouble in handing £2 billion of public contracts to their friends and donors; they have wasted billions on outsourcing projects to their friends that have not delivered; and they have spent £22 billion on a test, trace and isolate system that is far from "world-beating", leaving councils to pick up this function.

Covid might have closed our economy but, as a result of their incompetence and irresponsibility, the Conservatives have crashed it. The Prime Minister only today said that he bitterly regretted the burden this pandemic has put on families, so perhaps now he will listen to my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North, who has made it crystal clear that the Government should scrap this council tax bombshell and stand by their pledge to do whatever it takes to support councils and ease the burden that the Prime Minister accepts has been placed on families.

6.56 pm

The Minister for Regional Growth and Local Government (Luke Hall): May I begin, like so many Members, by expressing my huge appreciation for the incredible work that councils across the country have been doing to lead the response to the pandemic? Social workers, refuse collectors, carers, teachers, council officers and so many more have been on the frontline of our response to covid-19, and they have been unwavering in their determination to deliver the essential services we all rely on every day. That is why this Government have backed councils with the funding and resources they need to support our communities, businesses and local economies in this local government finance settlement.

This settlement delivers a 4.6% cash-terms increase in core spending power next year, an increase in real terms, guaranteeing that no council in England will have less funding available than last year. That comes on top of the settlement for this current financial year, which was a 4.5% rise in core spending power. That in itself was the best settlement for a decade and it was supported by every Member of this House. Alongside this settlement, in recognition of the fact that the pandemic is not yet over, we are providing a further at least £3 billion in covid-19 funding next year to support councils' income and expenditure. That takes the total support already committed to covid-19 income and expenditure pressures to more than £11 billion.

May I thank a number of my hon. Friends for their contributions today? My hon. Friends the Members for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) and for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) both highlighted the increase in resource going to Cornwall Council, with that 4.7% rise in core spending power in cash terms. My hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Antony Higginbotham) welcomed the rise in core spending power. The hon. Member for Blackburn (Kate Hollern) questioned how much was going to Burnley; I can tell her that it is a 2.6% rise, alongside the 5.3% rise going to Lancashire County

[*Luke Hall*]

Council. My hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) welcomed the extra support and swift provision of funds for Darlington Borough Council, with a 4.8% rise in core spending allowing, as he described, the council to deliver for local residents. May I put on record my thanks to Darlington Borough Council for the excellent work it is doing to restore the council to its rightful place?

I was slightly confused by the contribution from the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) when she said that there was no commitment in this settlement to increase funding in Salford. The opposite is true; in the current financial year there has been a 7.8% increase in core spending power; and the settlement we have published and are debating today sees an increase of 4.7% in core spending power for her council. I am afraid that she is incorrect in her statements.

A number of Members today raised covid support for their councils and talked about what they saw as the gap in funding between what councils spend and what we are providing them with. Councils' self-reported figures project that covid cost pressures this year will be £6.9 billion. We have already allocated £8 billion to councils, which is over £1 billion more than they are spending in responding to the pandemic. On top of that, we have provided a business rates holiday worth around £10 billion to local retail, hospitality and leisure industries. We have given councils over £17 billion to provide grants to thousands of businesses up and down our country, and they have done an incredible job in distributing those efficiently and speedily to ensure that businesses are getting the support they need. We have also introduced a sales, fees and charges scheme to help councils manage losses in income. We are backing local government all the way with the necessary funding, both now and into the future.

One of the recurring themes of the debate was the issue of social care, which was raised by the hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood), by the Chairman of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), and by my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt). This settlement helps to support the most vulnerable people in our society, especially in social care. We are providing access to an additional £1 billion in funding for adult social care in the coming financial year, which includes £300 million in grant funding for both adult and children's social care. We are also providing an additional adult social care tax flexibility of 3% to give councils the tools to make the best decisions for their residents, giving councils access to an extra £790 million. That is all on top of the £1 billion social care grant announced last year, which is being maintained in line with our manifesto commitment. We have responded to the pressures facing councils to ensure that they have the resources they need to provide the best-quality care for residents across the country.

A number of Members raised the point about the varying ability to raise resources to pay for the increasing costs of social care, and it is a very valid point. It is indisputable. It is a fact that some local authorities can raise more than others, but I am afraid that those Members have completely missed a key component of

this settlement, which is that we have chosen to help councils to bridge that gap through equalisation. We are taking specific action to level the playing field between different councils in different circumstances. Through this settlement, we will redistribute £390 million of social care grant, recognising this exact point that some councils can raise more than others through locally raised tax.

We make this commitment of £240 million this year, on top of the £150 million that is continuing from last year, so that funding is distributed fairly to those who need it most. Liverpool is receiving an extra £10.4 million, Manchester £9.2 million and Sheffield £6.9 million. We are determined to level up every part of the country using all the tools we have, and this is a clear, concrete example of us doing just that. The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) made this very point—she talked about the fact that it is more difficult to raise funds in Hull, but if she looks at the detail of the settlement, she will see that Hull is receiving £5.2 million through this equalisation mechanism to support its delivery of services and to ensure that people in her constituency receive access to first-class care.

A number of Members also raised points about council tax. Of course it is right that individual local authorities should make decisions on council tax levels themselves.

Adam Afriyie: Could I just ask the Minister to keep an open mind towards the idea of some local authorities being able to have another, higher council tax band—band I? This would be raised locally, which I hope local people would be comfortable with, rather than being reliant on central Government.

Luke Hall: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I will come on to talk about funding reform in a minute and perhaps try to address that point.

Importantly, we are giving councils the flexibility to defer rises using the adult social care precept to next year if they think that local circumstances dictate that that should be the case. That is of course a decision for them. Vitaly, as my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) pointed out, we are providing councils with up to £670 million of new funding to help them to reduce council tax bills for those who are least able to pay.

The referendum threshold that we have set strikes the right balance between allowing councils to raise income to deliver the services they need and making sure that residents have the final say over any excessive council tax rises. We trust councils to make the right decisions on council tax. I am afraid the Labour party cannot even persuade its own councils of that—they are constantly writing to the Secretary of State and me to ask for the caps to be removed completely. The long-standing policy of the Labour group on the LGA is to see the caps scrapped altogether.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker) made the fair point, raised by councils with particularly seasonal economies during the consultation on the settlement, that they could have lost out because of the proposed structure of the sales, fees and charges scheme for the first quarter of next year, as it might not best account for the impacts of the pandemic on their

income from April through to the end of June because usually they receive a large proportion of their annual income in that period, perhaps because of car parking and their having seasonal or coastal economies. We have listened to that point, and I thank my hon. Friend for raising it and the many councils that raised it during the consultation. We will allow them to use their seasonal profile so that they are able to claim a larger proportion of their losses in the April to June quarter of this coming financial year and are therefore better protected from the income losses because of covid-19. That is one of the many ways in which we are trying to support councils as we ensure that they have the resources they need to deliver first-class funding services.

A number of Members, including my hon. Friends the Members for Milton Keynes North, for Sedgefield (Paul Howell), for Waveney and for Windsor (Adam Afriyie), raised the possibility of future funding reform. I can confirm to them that we on the Government Benches still believe that we need an updated and fairer method of distributing funds among local government. This year, of course, we have had to concentrate on supporting councils through the pandemic—we did not think it was right to use this time to engage in detailed conversation about local government finance reform—but I absolutely reassure them that we are committed to the principles of reform and to making sure that we put money where it is needed most. Once we get through this pandemic, we will return to the priorities for financial reform. I am happy to have conversations with councils such as Windsor and to listen to their concerns if they have tried, historically, to do the right thing by keeping taxes low and want to understand their options for the future.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield talked about the fact that he wants to make sure that in any funding reform, rural funding is received in areas that have a large urban population centre but rural fringes. He is right to raise that issue and I am happy to discuss it with him.

Several colleagues raised rural services, and they are right that we have increased the rural services delivery grant this year from £81 million to £85 million, its highest ever level. We absolutely recognise that there are cost pressures—whether that is the need to drive long distances for refuse collection or to service more hubs across a larger geographic area—on the delivery of services in rural communities.

My hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) raised the individual circumstances that his constituents face. I am delighted that we are finding a way forward to work with his local authority to ensure that it can help to build the evidence case on the relative challenges facing the Island because of its separation from the mainland, with a particular focus on the impact of the local government finance system.

We are backing local government all the way with the necessary funding, both now and into the future, with a 4.6% rise in core spending power, £3 billion to help councils fight and recover from covid-19 and flexibility for councils to raise revenue, while also giving people the final say on excessive council tax increases. From our future high streets fund to our towns fund, the troubled families programme and increased funding to tackle domestic abuse and support rough sleepers and get them off the streets, we are backing councils, which

are at the forefront of our shared recovery. I hope Members from all parties recognise the critical importance of passing the settlement and giving local government the support and confidence they need to plan for the brighter days ahead. I commend the settlement to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Local Government Finance Report (England) 2021-22 (HC 1200), which was laid before this House on 4 February, be approved.

Resolved,

That the Referendums relating to Council Tax Increases (Alternative Notional Amounts) (England) Report 2021-22 (HC 1201), which was laid before this House on 4 February, be approved.—(*Michael Tomlinson.*)

Resolved,

That the Referendums relating to Council Tax Increases (Principles) (England) Report 2021-22 (HC 1202), which was laid before this House on 4 February, be approved.—(*Michael Tomlinson.*)

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

INTERNATIONAL IMMUNITIES AND PRIVILEGES

That the draft Bank for International Settlements (Immunities and Privileges) Order 2021, which was laid before this House on 11 January, be approved.—(*Michael Tomlinson.*)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

SOCIAL SECURITY

That the draft Social Security (Contributions) (Rates, Limits and Thresholds Amendments and National Insurance Funds Payments) Regulations 2021, which were laid before this House on 18 January, be approved.—(*Michael Tomlinson.*)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

That the draft Tax Credits, Child Benefit and Guardian's Allowance Up-rating Regulations 2021, which were laid before this House on 18 January, be approved.—(*Michael Tomlinson.*)

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Support for market traders

7.10 pm

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab) [V]: I rise to present a petition on behalf of Coventry South residents in support of Coventry market traders, following the difficulties they have faced during the covid-19 pandemic. Alongside it there is a petition from the Coventry branch of the National Market Traders' Federation on the same topic, which has been signed by dozens of traders.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of Coventry South, Declares that Coventry Market is one of Britain's best city markets but it has been adversely affected by the COVID-19 outbreak; and further declares that the Government has not

[Zarah Sultana]

provided adequate financial support for the hardworking Coventry Market Traders and other small traders during lockdown and other times of restrictions.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to bring forward measures to support Coventry Market Traders and similar small businesses.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002649]

Eden Project North

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Michael Tomlinson.*)

7.11 pm

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con) [V]: I am delighted to be able to open this Adjournment debate on an issue that is close to my heart and, indeed, to the hearts of many in the north of England, and certainly my constituents. I wish to focus attention on how to persuade the Government to help us get the Eden Project in Morecambe.

We all know that we face multiple challenges coming out of this pandemic—the most difficult of times that we have endured. While none of us has faced a pandemic previously, there are examples in our recent history of projects that we can enact to really change regions and give back hope, and that can deliver the right sort of growth and prosperity while not harming the environment around us. I am talking about projects that we can deliver on the old triple bottom line—economically, socially and environmentally.

We are all painfully aware of the story of coastal communities and the demise of many of Britain's fine seaside resorts, although there have been some rays of hope, with investments in places such as the Turner in Margate and the V&A in Dundee. Coastal communities that thrived as pleasure resorts in the 19th century have sadly been neglected for far too long. According to a report by the House of Lords Select Committee on Regenerating Seaside Towns and Communities, this must surely be the moment for our contribution to levelling up the covid recovery. What is required is investment in deprived regions to improve their levels of human and social capital, research and development, and innovation.

A proven example of such a project is the Eden Project in Cornwall. At the turn of the millennium, the Eden Project team delivered a bold vision that transformed an old clay pit into a truly spectacular asset for Cornwall and the south-west. From an initial public and private investment of £105 million, the Eden Project has returned more than £2 billion directly into the regional economy—a near fifteenfold return on investment going directly to businesses and workers across the region. At the same time, the Eden Project has become a powerful green UK brand, renowned across the whole world for its pioneering fusion of world-class horticulture, art and architecture delivered through a spectacular and unforgettable visitor experience.

Twenty years on, the same team have now reimaged their vision as Eden Project North. Set on a derelict site on Morecambe's once grand and bustling seafront, the old Lido, it will have even greater potential to transform the community, not just in Morecambe itself but around Morecambe bay, with a world-class visitor destination and a unique educational tool to help unite and inspire the next generation in terms of our natural history and the immense environmental challenges we face as a society. This is a very strange but exciting project. We want to build an ecological park—a bubble—in a seaside resort right in the middle of the town overlooking the beautiful Bay of Morecambe, itself overlooking the foothills of the Lake District and beyond.

As an educational charity, the Eden Project welcomes 50,000 schoolchildren a year to Cornwall and offers degree courses with local university partners. Similarly, Eden Project North is already investing in the future of the region, working with Lancaster University and other local institutions to create a bespoke education and training programme—the Morecambe bay curriculum, empowering young people to help to drive the UK's green recovery and making the north-west a key player in delivering the Government's net zero targets and 25-year environmental plan. Meanwhile, we are all working on eliminating educational poverty. This will be an excellent educational facility backed up by excellent educationists in the Lancaster-Morecambe district. There are 427 schools within 25 miles of the proposed site in Morecambe, and it is estimated that Eden Project North will directly engage with over 100,000 students per annum—1 million students over the next decade.

I am sure that the Minister would agree that providing this type of sustainable education fits directly with the Government's agenda. Given the current impact of covid on pupils and students and the need for the UK to inspire the next generation of environmental entrepreneurs, what better investment could the Government make than to support this incredible opportunity and deliver on so many policy areas at about the same price as two secondary schools? This is exemplary and groundbreaking, and Morecambe is the place to do it. We need to make Morecambe the jewel of the north-west once again.

The health and wellbeing of the wonderful Morecambe bay is at the heart of this timely proposal as well—a beacon for lasting positive social change in one of the north's most deprived areas. Eden Project North is a model of coastal community regeneration and long-term health benefits, which will be realised through nutritional education with reductions in obesity, diabetes and similar issues, with immeasurable reductions in reliance on many facets of modern healthcare. Eden Project North has set out its mission to improve the health of the bay through a unique ecosystem that can become a model for the 21st century of net-zero-carbon living. This is a whole-bay ecosystem of humans and nature living together.

As we forge our own destiny outside the EU, the need for us to be responsible guardians and stewards of our unique coastlines is self-evident. We have the responsibility to support these coastal communities, allowing them to prosper while encouraging them to respect and actively care for their environment. The Eden Project has a proven track record of community-building activities, including the incredibly successful Big Lunch, which 6 million people every year take part in. A good example is Eden Cornwall's local pass scheme whereby all Cornwall and Devon residents can buy a pass that allows them to access an all-year-round ticket that is half the price of standard admission. In addition, throughout the year, local residents and key workers such as teachers, Royal National Lifeboat Institution staff and NHS staff are invited to preview events and to access the site for free. I know that this will be welcomed in the Morecambe area as well as the Lancaster area and the whole north-west. The Eden Project engagement team has been working in the local community since 2017 and has received overwhelming support for the plans from local people, businesses and institutions. Ninety-nine per cent. of people who attended the series of consultation events said that they were in favour of Eden Project North—the kind of polling figures that any MP would be happy with.

Social prescribing programmes have been run at Eden Cornwall since 2016, helping hundreds of people, some of whom have had their lives completely changed, from housebound elderly people who now have new friends, to chronic obstructive pulmonary disease patients who are spending less time in hospital. The creation of these types of projects—epic year-round ventures—can attract 1 million visitors every year to the north-west. That will have obvious employment and output benefits and advantages for the region, the visitor economy and supply chains through focusing on improving the region's levels of human capital, research and development, and innovation. Quality-of-place investment in projects like Eden Project North can represent an important and significant levelling-up project. This will also help the Morecambe area, as the Morecambe bay link road from the M6 to Heysham port and into Morecambe itself is the quickest link from the M6 to a seaside area in the whole country; it takes less than 10 minutes to get from the M6 to the coast. It has been designed to be a catalytic investment that will provide a step change in the economic fortunes of Morecambe and will be an important economic asset to our region, contributing to the levelling up of economic performance between the north and south.

The high levels of deprivation in Morecambe and the north-west coast are symptoms of being left behind. We do not want to see that any longer. Morecambe is on the up and we want it to flourish, as it once did about 40 years ago and before. People on the north-west coast do feel that they are being left behind. Many local areas along the coast rank in the top 10 most deprived areas of England. The area within which the site is located is one of the most deprived parts of the country. We have to turn this around and make it a better area for us to live in. Although things are getting better in Morecambe, the Eden Project North will be the catalyst that sorts out this problem, a beacon for future generations, and a template for seaside resorts to adopt.

The project will be part of the north-west tourism zone in line with the tourism sector deal. It will be a world-class, epic destination and part of the north-west coastal arc for clean and sustainable growth. As such, it would be good to see sponsorship led by Lancaster University and building on its work with the Health Innovation Campus. Eden Project North will be an asset that can help to capitalise on the five opportunities identified in the science and innovation audit. It will be the brand that helps to galvanise investment and mobilise efforts, around which the partners can co-ordinate activity: communicating the economic importance of clean sustainable growth; improving connectivity between the region's assets for clean and sustainable growth; enhancing support for connecting businesses to global markets; training regional talent to support and lead clean and sustainable growth; and having the freedom and flexibility to support industrial research and development for clean and sustainable growth, particularly in small and medium-sized enterprises.

Another brilliant exemplar project is the N8 Research Partnership with Net Zero North, which focuses on green collar jobs and agritech developments, enabling Eden Project North to work with the Lancashire agritech group to develop a testbed to offer for productivity improvements in food production. Together, these types of projects will surely demonstrate that the Government

[David Morris]

have a lot of commitment to levelling up. Eden Project North is a cutting-edge facility that, through its design and operation, will contribute to meeting the UK's net zero target by 2050—an emissions pledge that we must keep—and provide jobs for some of the 2 million projected new green collar workers nationally.

Building on the success of the Eden Project in Cornwall, Eden Project North has now submitted its business case to the Government, demonstrating the impact that the development of an epic year-round destination in Morecambe can have. It will attract 1 million visitors a year to Morecambe and inject £200 million a year into the north-west region's economy, while from day one opening to support 1,500 quality year-round green collar jobs across the whole supply chain. It is fully compliant and has a business case with clear benefits to society. Will the Minister confirm that these are the type of high-quality, new green economic jobs that are needed in the north, and will he prioritise investment into Eden Project North as part of the economic levelling-up agenda?

Eden Project North has the potential to be a key driver, and an example of socioeconomic and environmental post-covid recovery for the north. Will the Minister confirm which Government funds, such as the shared prosperity fund, could be accessed and which have already been earmarked to enable schemes that will really drive the Government's levelling-up agenda? Is this project the true embodiment of the Government's levelling-up, "build back better" aspirations? I think it is. This project is shovel-ready and can be open by 2024, driving the local economy and acting as a beacon to the levelling-up agenda.

If Morecambe is not part of this levelling-up agenda, there will be very little faith among the public, given that Eden Project North has gone through every consultation one can think of. It has gone through many Departments, and this is my third speech on this particular subject of the new jewel in the crown of Morecambe. It will signal very strongly that the Government mean business, because this is a shovel-ready project, ready to be implemented and open by 2024.

We must be seen to deliver on investment across the north. Levelling up does not mean investing only in Manchester, Liverpool or Leeds—the major cities—but levelling up all across the north-west. Can the Minister reassure the people of the north-west, and specifically Morecambe and the Lancaster region, that they will not be forgotten, because Eden Project North will have a huge positive impact across Lancashire, Cumbria and Yorkshire? It is within easy reach of the north's urban centres. We are only about 40 minutes away from Manchester. We are about 20 minutes away from Preston, and looking further north, we can be in Scotland within an hour and a half.

I would like to see some indication of at what fiscal event Eden Project North will be able to attract match funding. The Eden Project has already got £55 million on the table and ready to go, and we now need some Government investment to make it happen—to get the bulldozers in there to start turning around the fortunes of Morecambe and the Lancaster district and to help turn around the fortunes of the north-west and its tourism.

7.26 pm

The Minister for Regional Growth and Local Government (Luke Hall): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris) on securing a debate on this important issue. He has been absolutely tireless in championing Eden Project North and in his dedication and commitment to the ambition and scale of the proposals and the real benefit they can bring to local communities. As he said, this is the third debate he has held on this subject, so I truly thank him for making sure that Ministers are fully aware of the benefits this project could bring.

My hon. Friend mentions the positive health impacts that Eden Project North can bring. I know that the Morecambe motto of "Beauty surrounds, health abounds" is what Eden Project North is all about. Situated on Morecambe bay, Eden and its partners have already been undertaking work with educational establishments to encourage young people to become engaged in driving the net zero agenda, which is crucial, and improving the health and wellbeing of the community in Morecambe.

We are determined to see all parts of the country, including the north, prosper. Since the Eden Project opened in Cornwall in 2001, it has established itself as a major UK visitor attraction, with an estimated 1 million visitors every year. When Eden began to look for a second site for a potential development, my hon. Friend was quick to work with local partners to present Morecambe as a potential site for the development. I received letters of support from local educational establishments, the Lancashire enterprise partnership and local government partners, all of which reflect the passion they feel about this project's economic and social benefits. The strong local partnership, including Lancashire enterprise partnership, Lancashire County Council, Lancaster University and Lancaster City Council, has now brought these plans to fruition. I know that my hon. Friend has been actively speaking to the Chancellor to highlight the aims of the project. That is in addition to the representations made by him, Lancaster University and Eden Project International to my Department and the Treasury for consideration at the spending review and next month's Budget.

I encourage my hon. Friend and other partners at Eden Project North to continue their engagement with the wide range of Departments that have a clear interest in the wider economic, social and environmental benefits the project could bring—benefits that have been made clear following the business case development that he supported so strongly. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport will be interested by the tourism potential and how we can get visitors back into venues like this after the pandemic. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is seeking ways to engage the public in sustainable technologies. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will be interested in the coastal impacts, as well as the links to sustainable food production and, of course, officials in my Department will be making those links across Government.

I hope my hon. Friend will understand that I am unable to pre-empt the forthcoming Budget, but I pay tribute to him for the creative and dynamic leadership that he has shown in driving this proposal forward, making sure that it is at the forefront of Ministers' minds. I know that he has been working across government, and I commend him along with the Eden Project partners

for their dedication and hard work. I know that he will continue to convene the various Departments to support plans for future investment.

May I also take this opportunity to thank Professor Dame Sue Black, the pro-vice-chancellor for engagement at Lancaster University, who I know has had a pivotal role? The commitment of Sue Black and the university at large has been very strong right from the inception of this project back in 2015, when they helped to get it off the ground, providing support for all of the early concept work. The wider effort to promote the opportunities that this project would have for communities and businesses across the whole of Lancashire and the northern powerhouse has been truly remarkable. We have seen a strong and unified voice from the local community to make this project a reality, to boost visitors, to create jobs, and to preserve the best that the local area has to offer, and that is largely down to my hon. Friend and his efforts. The fact that the Eden Project has now identified Morecambe as a preferred potential site for the development of an Eden Project North has shown that those efforts are bearing fruit.

As my hon. Friend has outlined, the plan submitted to the Government as an outline business case last September show how Eden Project North would draw on the natural beauty of the area and the unique physical and environmental features of Morecambe Bay. It reimagines Morecambe as a seaside resort for the 21st century, building on the Government-supported £140 million Bay Gateway, with improved connectivity to the region. The Eden Project and the local educational establishments, including Lancaster University, Lancaster and Morecambe College and local schools, have been working together to develop a place-based curriculum and, as my hon. Friend has said, this project has the potential to give a real boost to the world-class tourist industry across the lakes and the dales, thanks to its infrastructure and location. This in turn has the potential to give a real boost to local colonies across Lancashire, Cumbria and Yorkshire.

In total, the proposals outlined projections of more than 950,000 visitors every year and more than 450 full-time jobs, with 1,000 more full-time jobs in the supply chain. They outlined the benefits of working with partners in the north, such as the N8 research partnership and Net Zero North, promoting clean and sustainable growth, and they outlined plans for the site to be an exemplar for the net zero green economy, food production and associated technologies.

My hon. Friend also raised the importance of ensuring that this Government deliver on investment in the north-west, but not just in large cities. He was right to point that out and I completely agree with him. It is vital that all parts of our country feel that they have a part in our shared recovery. He also asked for reassurance for the people of the north-west, particularly for those in Morecambe and Lancaster, that they will not be forgotten. Again, I can give him that commitment. Already we have been pleased to invest in Morecambe through the coastal communities fund, which has, since 2012, invested more than £228 million in 359 projects across the United Kingdom. We have provided funding to help establish 146 coastal community teams around the English coast, including the Morecambe Bay coastal community team, and financial support for the Winter Gardens at Morecambe. Through the £45 million Discover England

fund, this Government have supported Lancashire and the north-west through the development of international marketing. That includes marketing Lancashire's campaign to encourage visitors from the Nordic countries and investment in VisitBritain, Britain's gateway partnership with Manchester Airport, to promote tourist destinations in the north-west, including on the Lancashire coast.

In order to achieve the aims of Eden Project North, my hon. Friend has highlighted the additional investment that is required. This amounts to £125 million, with a request of £70 million from the Government and £55 million contributions from the private sector. We will now consider those proposals carefully.

As my hon. Friend has highlighted, this Government place a priority on levelling up, building back better and, importantly, ensuring that those priorities are translated into real action for the north. I certainly agree that that is absolutely central to this Government's mission. The pandemic has, undoubtedly, hit some places harder than others, and it is important that people across all parts of the country see, feel and experience the benefits as we look towards our shared recovery.

Now that we are outside the European Union, we have a new opportunity to broaden our horizons and better meet local needs through our new UK shared prosperity fund, which, of course, my hon. Friend highlighted. Freed from the constraints of the poorly targeted and inflexible EU structural funds, the shared prosperity fund will ramp up nationwide investment so that it matches if not exceeds EU receipts, tightly focused on our domestic priorities, developing local economies and breathing new life into our communities.

The Prime Minister has set out his blueprint for a green industrial revolution, through a 10-point plan to support green jobs and accelerate our plan for net zero, as part of this Government's ambition to level up every region of the country. Delivering the spending review last November, the Chancellor set out how we will deliver stronger public services, honouring the promises that we made to the British people to provide for new hospitals, better schools and safer streets. He also announced that there would be investment in infrastructure and a £4 billion levelling-up fund to deliver the next generation of roads, bridges, railway stations and digital technology, as well as town centre regeneration and cultural amenities that could boost communities right across the country, including coastal communities such as Morecambe. This will play a significant role in our mission to level up and unite the country.

My hon. Friend asked for confirmation that Eden Project North is exactly the kind of project that this Government wish to support. Although I hope he will understand that I cannot make a decision today, I can give him that assurance. Proposals like Eden Project North are part and parcel of our core agenda to secure a vibrant and prosperous north and level up every part of our country. As my hon. Friend has said, this project has the potential to make an economic impact reaching far beyond the town itself, across the whole of Lancashire and, indeed, the northern powerhouse. It has the potential to create high-quality, new, green economy jobs, which are needed in the north.

The north has many areas of outstanding natural beauty, and this project could be an important part of the wider tourism offer, reimagining coastal communities for the 21st century, not just as an international visitor

[*Luke Hall*]

destination, but as a real asset in the region's post-covid economic recovery. As my hon. Friend said, the fact that it is shovel-ready means that it has real potential to drive local recovery and advance the post-covid economic growth in the north. I look forward to continued

conversations with my hon. Friend on this important proposal, and I thank him again for being such a champion of this proposal and his constituents.

Question put and agreed to.

7.38 pm

House adjourned.

Deferred Division

PUBLIC HEALTH

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (All Tiers and Self-Isolation) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2021 (S.I., 2021, No. 97), dated 28 January 2021, a copy of which was laid before this House on 29 January, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 526, Noes 24.

Division No. 230]

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Adams, Nigel
 Afolami, Bim
 Ahmad Khan, Imran
 Aiken, Nickie
 Aldous, Peter
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Allan, Lucy
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
 Amesbury, Mike
 Amess, Sir David
 Anderson, Fleur
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart
 Andrew, Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Argar, Edward
 Ashworth, Jonathan
 Atherton, Sarah
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Badenoch, Kemi
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baillie, Siobhan
 Baker, Duncan
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Barker, Paula
 Baron, Mr John
 Baynes, Simon
 Beckett, rh Margaret
 Begum, Apsana
 Bell, Aaron
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Benton, Scott
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, rh Jake
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blake, Olivia
 Blomfield, Paul
 Blunt, Crispin
 Brabin, Tracy
 Bradley, Ben
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Bristow, Paul
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Brokenshire, rh James
 Brown, Ms Lyn

Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Browne, Anthony
 Bruce, Fiona
 Bryant, Chris
 Buchan, Felicity
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Buckland, rh Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Burgon, Richard
 Burns, rh Conor
 Butler, Dawn
 Butler, Rob
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Carden, Dan
 Carter, Andy
 Cartlidge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Champion, Sarah
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Chishti, Rehman
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, Feryal
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, Mr Simon
 Clarke, Theo
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Cleverly, rh James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Cooper, Rosie
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Coutinho, Claire
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Coyle, Neil
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Creasy, Stella
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Crouch, Tracey
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John
 Cummins, Judith
 Cunningham, Alex
 Daby, Janet
 Daly, James
 David, Wayne
 Davies, David T. C.

Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Geraint
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Debbonaire, Thangam
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dinenage, Caroline
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Donelan, Michelle
 Dorries, Ms Nadine
 Double, Steve
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Dowden, rh Oliver
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Dromey, Jack
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, James
 Duffield, Rosie
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, Maria
 Eastwood, Mark
 Edwards, Ruth
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Ellis, rh Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elmore, Chris
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Chris
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Fell, Simon
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Ford, Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 Fuller, Richard
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Gardiner, Barry
 Garnier, Mark
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
 Glen, John
 Glendon, Mary
 Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Green, Kate
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffith, Nia
 Griffiths, Kate
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Hands, rh Greg
 Hardy, Emma
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet
 Harris, Carolyn
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Healey, rh John
 Heapey, James
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Henderson, Gordon
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hill, Mike
 Hillier, Meg
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollern, Kate
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Holloway, Adam
 Holmes, Paul
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Howarth, rh Sir George
 Howell, John
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, rh Jeremy
 Hunt, Tom
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jarvis, Dan
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, rh Boris
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Dame Diana
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnson, Kim

Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Jupp, Simon
 Kane, Mike
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, Gillian
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian
 Kruger, Danny
 Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
 Kyle, Peter
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Langan, Robert
 Lavery, Ian
 Leadsom, rh Andrea
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Levy, Ian
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, Clive
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Lloyd, Tony
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Lynch, Holly
 Mackrory, Cheryllyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Mak, Alan
 Malhotra, Seema
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 Maskell, Rachael
 Matheson, Christian
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCartney, Jason
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGinn, Conor
 McGovern, Alison

McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McPartland, Stephen
 Mearns, Ian
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria
 Milling, rh Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, David
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Morton, Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Murray, Ian
 Murray, James
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Nandy, Lisa
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Norris, Alex
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Onwurah, Chi
 Opperman, Guy
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Parish, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 Pawsey, Mark
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Philp, Chris
 Pincher, rh Christopher
 Pollard, Luke
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Powell, Lucy
 Prentis, Victoria
 Pritchard, Mark
 Pursglove, Tom

Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Raab, rh Dominic
 Randall, Tom
 Rayner, Angela
 Redwood, rh John
 Reed, Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reeves, Rachel
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Roberts, Rob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Rodda, Matt
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shah, Naz
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, rh Alok
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simmonds, David
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Royston
 Smyth, Karin
 Sobel, Alex
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Starmer, rh Keir
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevens, Jo
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Streeting, Wes

Stride, rh Mel
 Stringer, Graham
 Stuart, Graham
 Sultana, Zarah
 Sunak, rh Rishi
 Sunderland, James
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tarry, Sam
 Thomas, Derek
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, Nick
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Throup, Maggie
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trickett, Jon
 Trott, Laura
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, rh Mr Ben
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Webbe, Claudia
 West, Catherine
 Western, Matt
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitley, Mick
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Whittome, Nadia
 Wiggin, Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Winter, Beth
 Wood, Mike
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, Nadhim
 Zeichner, Daniel

NOES

Afriyie, Adam
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Blackman, Bob
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Brady, Sir Graham
 Davies, Philip
 Davis, rh Mr David

Drax, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Green, Chris
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Latham, Mrs Pauline

Mackinlay, Craig
McCartney, Karl
McVey, rh Esther
Morris, Anne Marie
Rosindell, Andrew

Smith, Henry
Sturdy, Julian
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Walker, Sir Charles
Wragg, Mr William

Question accordingly agreed to.

The list of Members currently certified as eligible for a proxy vote, and of the Members nominated as their proxy, is published below.

Members Eligible for a Proxy Vote

The following is the list of Members currently certified as eligible for a proxy vote, and of the Members nominated as their proxy:

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy	Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy	Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab)	Mark Tami	Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nigel Adams (Selby and Ainsty) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Margaret Beckett (Derby South) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Imran Ahmad Khan (Wakefield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab)	Mark Tami	Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab)	Mark Tami	Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab)	Mark Tami	Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab)	Mark Tami	Saqib Bhatti (Meriden) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab)	Mark Tami	Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con)	Chris Loder	Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Stuart Anderson (Wolverhampton South West) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab)	Mark Tami	Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab)	Mark Tami	Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op)	Mark Tami
Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Suella Braverman (Fareham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP)	Patrick Grady	Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
		Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
		Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
		James Brokenshire (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy	Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudon) (SNP)	Patrick Grady	Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab)	Mark Tami	Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Anthony Browne (South Cambridgeshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Theo Clarke (Stafford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab)	Mark Tami	Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab)	Mark Tami	James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Dr Thérèse Coffey (Suffolk Coastal) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy	Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Conor Burns (Bournemouth West) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy	Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab)	Mark Tami	Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab)	Mark Tami	Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab)	Mark Tami	Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Robert Courts (Witney) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP)	Patrick Grady	Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP)	Patrick Grady	Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Sir Alan Campbell (Tynemouth) (Lab)	Mark Tami	Sir Geoffrey Cox (Torridge and West Devon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP)	Sir Jeffrey M Donaldson	Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab)	Mark Tami	Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain	Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab)	Mark Tami
James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Jon Cruddas (Dagenham and Rainham) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab)	Mark Tami	Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP)	Patrick Grady	Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab)	Mark Tami	James Daly (Bury North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP)	Patrick Grady	Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Gareth Davies (Grantham and Stamford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op)	Mark Tami
Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mims Davies (Mid Sussex) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dehenna Davison (Bishop Auckland) (Con)	Ben Everitt
Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Marsha De Cordova (Battersea)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesei (Slough) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Caroline Dinenege (Gosport) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Miss Sarah Dines (Derbyshire Dales) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op)	Mark Tami
Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Allan Dorans (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Ms Nadine Dorries (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab)	Mark Tami
David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab)	Mark Tami

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP)	Patrick Grady
Mark Eastwood (Dewsbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind)	Stuart Andrew
Ruth Edwards (Rushcliffe) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op)	Mark Tami
Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab)	Mark Tami
George Eustice (Camborne and Redruth) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op)	Mark Tami
Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Laura Farris (Newbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance)	Wendy Chamberlain
Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind)	Stuart Andrew
Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mark Fletcher (Bolsover) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mike Freer (Finchley and Golders Green) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op)	Mark Tami
Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP)	Sir Jeffrey M Donaldson
John Glen (Salisbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Mr Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Michael Gove (Surrey Heath) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Damian Green (Ashford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Kate Griffiths (Burton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
James Grundy (Leigh) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Matt Hancock (West Suffolk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP)	Ben Lake
Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Rebecca Harris (Castle Point) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab)	Mark Tami
James Heapey (Wells) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Chris Heaton-Harris (Daventry) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gordon Henderson (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op)	Mark Tami
Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Darren Henry (Broxtowe) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Anthony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Adam Holloway (Gravesham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Paul Holmes (Eastleigh) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Sir George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab)	Mark Tami
John Howell (Henley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Sajid Javid (Bromsgrove) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mark Jenkinson (Workington) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Boris Johnson (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab)	Mark Tami
David Johnston (Wantage) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Fay Jones (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab)	Mark Tami

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Simon Jupp (East Devon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Danny Kruger (Dezives) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab)	Mark Tami
John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Robert Langan (High Peak) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con)	Mr William Wragg
Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ian Levy (Blyth Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Brandon Lewis (Great Yarmouth) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP)	Sir Jeffrey M Donaldson

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy	Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy	Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Shabana Mahmood (Birmingham, Ladywood) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Alan Mak (Havant) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Mr Jonathan Lord (Woking) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy	Julie Marson (Hertford and Stortford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab)	Mark Tami	Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (SNP)	Patrick Grady	Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab)	Mark Tami	Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab)	Mark Tami	Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab)	Mark Tami	Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab)	Mark Tami	Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP)	Patrick Grady	Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP)	Patrick Grady	Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy	Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab)	Mark Tami	Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab)	Mark Tami	Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab)	Mark Tami	Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab)	Mark Tami	Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP)	Patrick Grady	Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab)	Mark Tami	Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West)	Patrick Grady
Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab)	Mark Tami	Damien Moore (Southport) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP)	Patrick Grady	Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)	Patrick Grady	Penny Mordaunt (Portsmouth North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
		David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab)	Mark Tami
James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con)	Chris Loder
Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab)	Mark Tami
James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op)	Mark Tami
Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Lia Nici (Great Grimsby) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op)	Mark Tami
Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Guy Opperman (Hexham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (Con)	Sir Jeffrey M Donaldson
Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Priti Patel (Witham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab)	Mark Tami
John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Christopher Pincher (Tamworth) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op)	Mark Tami
Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op)	Mark Tami
Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Will Quince (Colchester) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab)	Mark Tami
John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op)	Mark Tami
Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Nicola Richards (West Bromwich East) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Rob Roberts (Delyn) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy	Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP)	Sir Jeffrey M Donaldson	Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab)	Mark Tami	Amanda Solloway (Derby North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Dean Russell (Watford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op)	Mark Tami	Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Gary Sambrook (Birmingham, Northfield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Jane Stevenson (Wolverhampton North East) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC)	Ben Lake	John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Sir Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab)	Mark Tami	Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP)	Sir Jeffrey M Donaldson	Mel Stride (Central Devon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Grant Shapps (Welwyn Hatfield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Alok Sharma (Reading West) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab)	Mark Tami	Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op)	Mark Tami	Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy
Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Rishi Sunak (Richmond (Yorks)) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP)	Patrick Grady	James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab)	Mark Tami	Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con)	Mr William Wragg
David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab)	Mark Tami	Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP)	Patrick Grady	Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab)	Mark Tami	Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op)	Mark Tami
Chloe Smith (Norwich North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab)	Mark Tami	Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab)	Mark Tami	Edward Timpson (Eddisbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Royston Smith (Southampton, Itchen) (Con)	Stuart Andrew		

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy	Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Stroud) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Mrs Heather Wheeler (South Derbyshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy	Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Elizabeth Truss (South West Norfolk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	John Whittingdale (Malden) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab)	Mark Tami	Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab)	Mark Tami	James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Craig Williams (Montgomeryshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC)	Ben Lake
Matt Vickers (Stockton South) (Con)	Chris Loder	Gavin Williamson (Montgomeryshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Sammy Wilson East Antrim) (DUP)	Sir Jeffrey M Donaldson
Mr Ben Wallace (Wyre and Preston North)	Stuart Andrew	Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab)	Rachel Hopkins
Dr Jamie Wallis (Bridgend) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP)	Patrick Grady
Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
David Warburton (Somerset and Frome) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Suzanne Webb (Stourbridge) (Con)	Stuart Andrew	Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Claudia Webbe (Leicester East) (Ind)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy	Nadhim Zahawi (Stratford-on-Avon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab)	Mark Tami	Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab)	Mark Tami
Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab)	Mark Tami		

Written Statements

Wednesday 10 February 2021

CABINET OFFICE

National Fraud Initiative: Data Matching Purposes and Code of Data Matching Practice

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Julia Lopez):

The Cabinet Office is looking to consult on widening the national fraud initiative (NFI) data matching powers and updating the NFI code of data matching practice. The powers are embedded within the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014. The powers are:

- to assist in the prevention and detection of crime (other than fraud);
- to assist in the apprehension and prosecution of offenders;
- to assist in prevention and detection of errors and inaccuracies; and
- to assist in the recovery of debt owing to public bodies.

Currently, the NFI can only match the data it collects for the purposes of detecting and preventing fraud¹. These proposals focus on increasing NFI's operational efficiency and value for the public sector by widening those purposes. Early estimates suggest that by better utilising data already collected by NFI, supplemented by additional data collection where appropriate, enactment of these powers could deliver early efficiency savings (within the first three years) of at least £10 million a year to key public sector organisations. We would expect savings to be far greater over a longer period. Critically, research shows that there are clearly important wider outcomes for citizens overall: that the data matching powers would help

- the police solve crimes other than fraud, or find offenders more efficiently than is currently the case;
- local authorities and Government Departments to reduce debt owed to public bodies while adhering to the fairness in debt management principles; and
- agencies or departments to reduce any errors that might exist in official data records, thereby helping to deliver more effective services or to ensure citizens receive the benefits they are entitled to.

Operating within a strong governance framework since 1996, the NFI already collects over 8,000 datasets, 300 million records of data from over 1,300 participant organisations². To date it has already enabled participants to prevent and detect fraud and overpayments across the UK worth £1.9 billion through data matching. The powers were embedded into the Act in 2014 when the NFI transferred to the Cabinet Office and are not part of the current covid-19 emergency response or legislation. Our work to date shows that the powers will create longer term efficiency savings that will help public services. This aligns with the Cabinet Office role of creating efficiencies across Government and the Government's manifesto commitment to improve the use of data in the process of government. We are committed to transparency on these proposals. Work to enact the powers was one of the five key objectives set out in the NFI strategic delivery plan 2018-2022. The results of this consultation

will be instrumental in determining the way forward. The consultation documents are available on gov.uk and will be open for responses until 10/03/2021.

¹Data matching compares data to identify anomalies that might represent a fraud. The NFI is not permitted to identify patterns and trends in an individual's characteristics or behaviour which suggest nothing more than the individual's potential to commit fraud in the future.

²The NFI has both mandatory and voluntary participants. Participants include all local authorities, NHS trusts, police authorities, passenger transport executives (PTEs), fire and rescue services and combined authorities in the UK. Government Departments and private sector organisations can participate on a voluntary basis.

[HCWS777]

TRANSPORT

Spaceflight Regulator: Environmental Objectives

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport

(Rachel Maclean): I am today publishing the consultation on the Government's environmental objectives which the spaceflight regulator will take into account when exercising its spaceflight functions under the Space Industry Act 2018. We are also consulting on the associated guidance to the regulator on how the Government expect it to interpret these environmental objectives. Responses to the consultation are sought by Wednesday 24 March 2021.

This Government are committed to growing the space sector in the UK and cementing our leading role in this sector by unlocking a new era in commercial spaceflight across the UK. Government and industry have set a target to grow the UK's share of the global market to 10% by 2030. The UK space sector directly employs 41,900 people and contributes £5.7 billion to UK gross domestic product (GDP). The space sector will need another 30,000 people if it is to achieve its ambition to secure 10% of the world market by 2030. To support this, our spaceflight programme will enable commercial spaceports to be established in the UK that will facilitate a variety of spaceflight activities, including vertical and horizontal satellite launch and sub-orbital spaceflight. Growing the UK's launch capability will help bring new jobs and economic benefits to communities and organisations right across the UK, as well as inspiring the next generation of space scientists and engineers. Harnessing the opportunities provided by commercial spaceflight will feed into our emerging national space strategy, the Government's agenda to level up the UK, and global Britain.

Access to space and the use of space-based technology also brings many benefits to the environment, allowing us to, for example, observe weather patterns, monitor climate change, manage natural resources, and monitor for harmful activities such as illegal deforestation, fishing and animal poaching. The UK space sector has an established world-class satellite manufacturing capability and technical expertise, which already makes a significant contribution to global efforts to monitor and understand the Earth's environment. For example, the 2018 British-built satellite Aeolus is used to revolutionise the accuracy of weather forecasting, providing benefits to all citizens on Earth.

The introduction of commercial spaceflight to the UK will have environmental implications at the global, national, regional and local level. The objectives and

guidance recognise that to deliver the Government's economic, social and environmental objectives, we need to balance mitigating the potentially negative environmental impacts of spaceflight activities with enhancing the strong contributions commercial spaceflight can make to both the economy and our local and global efforts to monitor the environment.

The Space Industry Act 2018 requires applicants for a spaceport or launch operator licence to submit an assessment of environmental effects (the assessment) as part of their licence application. The objectives and guidance that Government propose setting explain how

the spaceflight regulator will take into account the assessment when deciding licence applications and setting licence conditions.

We have worked with environmental agencies, public bodies and Government Departments to ensure coherence with our national and international policies and obligations.

Our intention is to have these objectives in place by the time the secondary legislation and guidance—on which we consulted on 29 July 2020—comes into force this summer and the regulator begins receiving and assessing applications.

[HCWS776]

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**not later than
Wednesday 17 February 2021**

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