

Thursday
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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 25 February 2021

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Virtual participation in proceedings commenced (Orders, 4 June and 30 December 2020). [NB: [V] denotes a Member participating virtually.]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

ELECTORAL COMMISSION

The VICE-CHAMBERLAIN OF THE HOUSEHOLD reported to the House, That Her Majesty had received its Humble Addresses praying that she should reappoint Dame Susan Bruce DBE as an Electoral Commissioner with effect from 1 January 2021 for the period ending on 31 December 2023 and Dame Elan Closs Stephens DBE as an Electoral Commissioner with effect from 13 March 2021 for the period ending on 12 March 2025, and that she was graciously pleased to comply with the request.

INDEPENDENT PARLIAMENTARY STANDARDS AUTHORITY

The VICE-CHAMBERLAIN OF THE HOUSEHOLD reported to the House, That Her Majesty had received its Humble Addresses praying that she should appoint Helen Jones to the office of ordinary member of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority with effect from 1 January 2021 for the period ending 31 December 2025 and that she should reappoint Sir Robert Owen to the office of ordinary member of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority with effect from 1 January 2021 for the period ending 31 December 2023, and that she was graciously pleased to comply with the request.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION

The VICE-CHAMBERLAIN OF THE HOUSEHOLD reported to the House, That Her Majesty had received its Humble Address praying that she should appoint Alexander Attwood as an Electoral Commissioner with effect from 1 February 2021 for the period ending on 31 January 2024, and that she was graciously pleased to comply with the request.

Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Trade Deals with ASEAN Countries

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): What progress she has made on securing trade deals with ASEAN countries. [912429]

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Elizabeth Truss): Last year, we secured trade deals with Vietnam and Singapore. This month, I submitted our application

to the CPTPP—the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership—a huge free trade area covering £9 trillion of GDP, which contains four ASEAN countries.

Mark Garnier [V]: First, I congratulate my right hon. Friend on everything she and her Department have achieved in terms of signing trade deals across the world. It is certainly important that the UK continues to engage in deepening its trading relationships with its close allies and trading partners, such as Australia, New Zealand and the United States, but there are also many other significant trading partners and friends across the globe, such as the Kingdom of Thailand, where I serve as the Prime Minister's trade envoy. Could my right hon. Friend see her way to prioritising Thailand in the next round of countries to engage in formal free trade agreement negotiations, so that we can formalise our trading relationship with this long-standing and valued trading partner?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the importance of Thailand. We have a bilateral relationship worth £5 billion a year and he is doing a fantastic job as our trade envoy to that great country. We are currently conducting a joint trade review to identify priorities in agriculture, pharmaceuticals and food and drink, and this is strong groundwork for a future FTA negotiation.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I am delighted to see that the Secretary of State is answering questions about the 2.9% of our global trade that we have with ASEAN countries, having refused to answer questions about the 47% of our trade with Europe. However, as that is clearly her priority, can she tell us this: why has she decided not to suspend Cambodia's trade preferences, given the escalating human rights abuses in that country? How bad would these abuses need to get before the so-called "last resort" was reached?

Elizabeth Truss: I would point out to the right hon. Lady that the trade that I am responsible for covers 80% of GDP, and the reason we have not hitherto had as much trade with that part of the world is the high trade barriers that we are seeking to remove through these trade agreements. I do, however, share her concerns about human rights violations in Cambodia, and this Government continue to raise the issue with the Cambodian Government at every opportunity.

Emily Thornberry: I listened carefully to the Secretary of State's answer, which I find very interesting indeed. Is she not aware of the guidance that has been given by her Department to UK companies doing business in Cambodia? It was published by her Department last week and contains this reassuring advice:

"while political disputes could trigger protests, these would be broken up rapidly by the security forces."

That sounds to me like her Department does not care. How does she think it sounds in Cambodia?

Elizabeth Truss: As I have said, we are concerned about the situation in Cambodia, but it is important to recognise that trade sanctions can often have impacts on the poorest people in a country. The best way that we can achieve our objectives is through the work of the Foreign Office and my colleague the Foreign Secretary, in raising this issue at a political level.

Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP) [V]: Mòran taing fawr, Mr Speaker. The UK Government have removed direct access to the EU market, damaging GDP for the UK by about 4.9%, and that is the area that 47% of UK exports go to. The Minister has not replaced that with any new markets at all; all the new deals have been merely rollovers of EU deals. So, forgetting all the flowery adjectives about trade deals, and she did talk about GDP, what do the numbers say about the gains to GDP from ASEAN trade deals? Also, does she have any numbers for the CPTPP yet?

Elizabeth Truss: The Chairman of the Select Committee understands that a lot of the economies we are talking about are fast-growing. We want to be in a position, in 2030 to 2040, to make sure that the UK has deep relationships with some of the fastest-growing parts of the world, like—CPTPP—the United States and places where our exports are currently growing faster than they are for the EU. I would also point out to him that it is Lord Frost and the Cabinet Office who are responsible for negotiating and working with the EU.

Trade Deals: Human Rights Clauses

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with UK trade partners on inserting clauses on human rights in future trade deals. [912430]

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with UK trade partners on inserting clauses on human rights in future trade deals. [912436]

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with UK trade partners on inserting clauses on human rights in future trade deals. [912465]

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with UK trade partners on inserting clauses on human rights in future trade deals. [912472]

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with UK trade partners on inserting clauses on human rights in future trade deals. [912478]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mr Ranil Jayawardena): The United Kingdom has long promoted her values globally. While our approach to agreements will vary between partners, it will always allow this Government to open discussions on issues, including rights and responsibilities. We are clear that more trade does not have to come at the expense of our values.

Emma Hardy [V]: The Lords have listened to the Minister's objections to the genocide amendment and done everything to accommodate them in its latest iteration, while retaining the fundamental objective that judges should decide whether genocide has been committed. On behalf of the Government, will the Minister of State finally agree to accept the will of Parliament and back this historic amendment?

Mr Jayawardena: We are clear that Britain has a long history of protecting rights and promoting our values globally. We will continue to encourage all states to uphold international rights obligations, including those under the convention on the prevention and punishment of the crime of genocide. We supported an amendment in this House on the principle of a formal parliamentary process leading to a guaranteed debate, but the latest amendment is unacceptable because it seeks to bring about constitutional reform by the back door, and it would impinge on the proper constitutional settlement, blurring the distinctions between the courts and Parliament.

Tony Lloyd [V]: I say to the Minister that this country does have a proud record of upholding human rights, but this Government have a very unhappy record of allowing, for example, arms sales to Saudi Arabia, which has seen the killing of innocent men, women and children. On that basis, does he accept that trust is fundamentally important on the issue of human rights under any Government? Why should anybody trust this Government?

Mr Jayawardena: I certainly want to make sure that all Members across this House can trust this Government, but I say gently to the hon. Gentleman that Labour's record on this is hypocritical and, sadly, it enabled antisemitism to be rife within its ranks. Its members turned a blind eye to terrible behaviour from countries that they like, such as Venezuela, and the shadow Secretary of State even shared a platform with Hamas. So we will not be lectured by the Opposition on these issues.

Cat Smith: I last raised this issue on the Floor of the House on 19 November, and the Minister for Trade Policy told me to

“judge us on our deeds and not always on our words.”—[*Official Report*, 19 November 2020; Vol. 684, c. 455.]

So can I clarify, when it comes to human rights and Saudi air strikes in Yemen, that we should be judging the Government on the export licensing statistics published last month, which included the sale of £1.36 billion-worth of bombs and missiles to Saudi between July and September 2020—almost as much as the last 19 quarters put together?

Mr Jayawardena: We have a rigorous arms export control system in this country, one of the best in the world, and no arms will be exported that are inconsistent with the consolidated criteria, which were introduced in 2014.

Rachel Hopkins [V]: I just want to press the Minister on the issues raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith). Last September, the UN said that Saudi airstrikes in Yemen had led to a consistent pattern of harm to civilians, unlike our own Government who said in July that there was no such pattern and that it was therefore lawful to resume arms exports. Can the Minister of State explain how his Department looked at exactly the same evidence as the UN and reached an entirely different conclusion?

Mr Jayawardena: We rely on a range of information from across Government, non-governmental organisations and elsewhere and we will always make sure that all of that evidence is properly considered before any arms are exported anywhere in the world.

Imran Hussain [V]: Grave human rights abuses, including torture, rape, extra-judicial killings, and arbitrary detention continue to be committed against Kashmiris in Indian-occupied Kashmir. Will the Minister ensure that any trade deal signed with the Indian Government includes firm commitments to ending those human rights abuses and holding a free and fair plebiscite, as agreed by the United Nations, that allows the sons and daughters of Kashmir to fulfil their birthright to self-determination?

Mr Jayawardena: I do not doubt the hon. Gentleman's passion for this issue, but where is the passion for jobs, where is the passion for exports, and where is the passion for investment? That is what this Government are getting on with. Perhaps it is because they cannot make up their minds on the Opposition Benches: they are against deals with democracies such as Israel as well, and yet they have cosied up to regimes such as Venezuela. Although this question was about future trade deals, we will get on and deliver jobs and prosperity for the British people.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): It has now been two months since Ministers agreed a trade deal with Cameroon. It was shortly before the US Senate voted to suspend theirs because of President Biya's human rights record. Incredibly, we do not know what the UK's trade deal with Cameroon says on human rights, because it has still not been published. Can the Minister tell us when Parliament will be finally shown that deal, and can he guarantee a debate on it in Government time?

Mr Jayawardena: I welcome the fact that the shadow Minister is interested in our trade agreement with Cameroon, which benefits both countries to the tune of £177 million-worth of bilateral trade, but the British people will have heard today six questions from the Labour Benches and not one of them included anything about jobs. That just shows, sadly, that Labour has no intention of delivering for the British people and capitalising on our independent trade policy, because it is anti-trade, anti-jobs and EU-obsessed, and it sneers at those who do not share their world view and are proud to be British.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab) [V]: One area, of course, where we do not have problems with human rights clauses being inserted is the EU. The Minister is interested in jobs. I have a small company in my constituency, Poco Nido, which employs four people. The owner of that company, Catherine Loble, has told me that, since the end of December, she has not had a single shipment of goods getting through to the EU. The goods are caught up in customs and have been stuck there for three weeks. She says that the whole system has collapsed. Her 10-year-old business will be destroyed, with the jobs, within a month unless the Minister acts. When will the Minister ensure that the Brexit deal that the Government promised is actually delivered in practice?

Mr Jayawardena: My hon. Friend the Minister for exports is doing great work to make sure that British businesses can export to the world, including the EU, and the hon. Gentleman will know that we have covered deals with 64 countries, plus the EU, protecting trade

worth £889 billion. Of course we want to make sure that, in the years ahead, there can be more trade with the EU, our near neighbours and good friends, but we are also focused in this Department on trading with the world.

High Growth Global Markets

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What steps she is taking to improve access for UK exporters to high-growth global markets. [912431]

Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): What steps she is taking to improve access for UK exporters to high-growth global markets. [912440]

Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con): What steps she is taking to improve access for UK exporters to high-growth global markets. [912445]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): Driving access for UK exporters to high-growth markets worldwide is at the heart of this Department's work, securing new free trade agreements, removing trade barriers and informing, encouraging, connecting and financing exporters. Ninety per cent of global growth—90%—over the coming years is expected to be outside Europe, so that is why we are hitching UK business to the fastest-growing markets and have recently applied to join the CPTPP.

Daniel Kawczynski: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. What action is the UK taking to increase our export footprint in future growth areas such as renewable energy, particularly in countries such as Mongolia?

Graham Stuart: The Department—not only in renewables, but in minerals as well—is running a mining export campaign for Mongolia, supporting UK-based investors and our mining supply chain, using the unique convening power of government to engage with the Mongolian Government and mining businesses. We are supporting UK investment in solar and waste energy plants, and are in discussions with the Mongolian Government on UK participation in infrastructure projects, including renewables, which my hon. Friend mentions, and hydropower. Atop all that is the cherry, in the form of my hon. Friend, who is the Prime Minister's dynamic and effective trade envoy for the country.

Dr Davies [V]: I thank my hon. Friend for all the work he does to strengthen trading relationships between Britain and our international partners. Can he assure me that the Department for International Trade regularly engages with businesses of all sizes across the UK, including north Wales, to ensure that the objectives of the Department are closely aligned with the needs of industry?

Graham Stuart: My hon. Friend is quite right to highlight this issue. DIT has a relationship with more than 200,000 UK businesses, ranging from large multinationals to small start-ups. Our UK-based sector teams, our highly experienced trade advisers across the regions and devolved Administrations, and our teams in our overseas embassies all work closely with UK businesses to support their export ambitions, while our export academy programme builds small and medium-sized enterprise know-how, enabling businesses to sell to customers around the world with confidence.

Miriam Cates [V]: Steel manufacturers such as Liberty Speciality Steels in Stocksbridge produce high-quality components that are used across the world. Steel produced in Europe has half the carbon footprint of equivalent Chinese imports, and, as countries follow the UK's lead in reducing emissions demands, demand for green steel will increase. How will my hon. Friend ensure that UK manufacturers such as Liberty Speciality Steels can capitalise on this growing market and make global Britain the world leader in green steel?

Graham Stuart: I thank my hon. Friend for that excellent question. There is a real opportunity here, is there not? That is why the Government have a range of schemes in place to help the steel sector to expand its green exports into those growing global markets. That includes establishing a £250 million clean steel fund and providing £66 million through the industrial strategy challenge fund to help steel manufacturers to develop radical new technologies and establish innovation centres of excellence. These funds will be accessible to all UK steel manufacturers, including those in my hon. Friend's constituency, which I am sure value her long-standing commitment to the sector, and her permanent and regular efforts to raise them in the House.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP) [V]: Dream Climbing Walls is a Scottish business that was exporting to the high-growth market that is the European Union, which accounted for around 60% of its sales. After Brexit, its costs due to customs charges and delivery add-ons have skyrocketed. Goods that would normally take three to four days to arrive are currently a month in transit. Because of this Government, that business is now climbing the wall in a very different sense. What steps is the Minister taking to sort out this Government's calamitous mess, and will he now urgently look at measures to compensate the thousands of companies just like Dream Climbing Walls that have lost out as a result of this Government's actions?

Graham Stuart: May I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his personal commitment to rigorous scrutiny and ensuring that the Government are held to account? I am sure that he would agree that others could do likewise in being similarly robust. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has already made clear, it is our noble friend Lord Frost and the Cabinet Office who lead on that particular work. There are teething problems and there will be on ongoing frictions every day, but I am pleased to say that we are reducing those and are now seeing a return to pre-covid levels at our border. We will continue to work with and support our exporters in order to learn how best to do this. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will ensure that his Administration support his colleagues in the SNP and beyond to help support exporters.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab) [V]: I appreciate that the Minister wants to promote exports to some countries more than to others, but many of our constituents trade with Europe and need to safeguard their existing relationships before going looking for new ones. That is just good business practice. His Department telling exporters to open an office in the EU is not good practice when it is its answer to delays at the border that it was warned about. When are Ministers going to sort out the problems at the border that mean businesses are drowning in red tape?

Graham Stuart: I would have hoped that the shadow Minister would be aware of where Government responsibilities lie in terms of the negotiations with the EU, but I can assure him that the work is ongoing to do that. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman, who is, unusually for a Labour Member, a former businessman himself—*[Interruption.]* I am being endlessly heckled by the shadow Secretary of State, who probably knows where I am going with this, because she appears more interested in exports to Venezuela and Russia and only last month was chiding the Secretary of State for talking to the US—

Mr Speaker: Order. We don't want to fall out again, do we? We have got Anne McLaughlin in Glasgow waiting.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP) [V]: One of the biggest global growth markets for local companies until Brexit was the EU. A1 Kilt Hire in my constituency was doing a roaring trade hiring out kilts to wedding parties across Europe, but nobody in the UK Government has been able to tell it if and how it can continue trading because its products are for hire and not for sale. HMRC could not even tell it if it would have to pay tax when the kilts were returned. Where on earth can hire companies that have survived this double whammy so far go to for advice on continuing to trade in Europe? Given the Minister's two previous answers, I am guessing that it is not him.

Mr Speaker: With the Minister's family background, we might get a good answer.

Graham Stuart: I must congratulate the hon. Lady on the speed of her uptake, because yes indeed, as I have said in my previous answers, this is for a different Department of Government. I think she suggested that the EU was a growing share of the global market, but it is not. Twenty years ago it was the majority of our exports; now it is a minority. Its share of global GDP has been falling. We are, at the direction of the Secretary of State, pitching our business to the fastest-growing parts of the world, not the more sclerotic.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab) [V]: Mounting costs are killing one of our biggest exports—culture—with additional duties on physical product and performers. My constituent Andy Smart has regularly performed at two comedy/ski festivals, but now one of them no longer accepts Brits, preferring the Irish, and the other has been cancelled as unviable because of Brexit obstacles. Can we work cross-departmentally to abolish these levies, because, as one of those festivals is called, it is literally taking the pish?

Graham Stuart: There is no one better in this House than the hon. Lady at marrying sociological insight with popular culture, and of course as an experienced DJ she knows more about music than most of the rest of us. I entirely agree with her, though, that we have to work flat out, in a cross-governmental way, to ensure that we minimise any frictions at the border for those vital and important cultural exports of which music is an important part.

G7 Presidency

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): What recent discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on trade priorities for the UK's G7 presidency. [912432]

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): What recent discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on trade priorities for the UK's G7 presidency. [912439]

Darren Henry (Broxtowe) (Con): What recent discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on trade priorities for the UK's G7 presidency. [912448]

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Elizabeth Truss): The United Kingdom has a huge opportunity, with the presidency of the G7 this year and the election of Dr Ngozi as World Trade Organisation director general, to drive forward free and fair trade. This is more important than ever as we seek to recover from covid and address the issues with the WTO. We hope to make good progress ahead of the ministerial conference in December.

Mr Mohindra [V]: May I once again commend my right hon. Friend for the excellent work she and her team have done to date? Can she advise the House what she will be looking to achieve under the trade track?

Elizabeth Truss: Under the trade track, there will be an opportunity for G7 democracies to work together to help to reform free and fair global trade and shape a bold vision for recovery. In particular, we want to make progress on key issues such as challenging unfair industrial subsidies, dealing with carbon leakage and promoting digital trade.

Alexander Stafford [V]: A key plank of the UK's future trade strategy must be dedicated to securing our supply of critical minerals, which are vitally important components in the next generation of green renewables and communications equipment. Does the Secretary of State agree with me that in the run-up to the G7 summit, we must take urgent action, first, to work with allies to form a stable, reliable and independent coalition for the mining and processing of critical minerals and, secondly, to bolster the British critical minerals industry for domestic use and for exports?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. We need to work with allies to make sure we have resilient supply chains of critical minerals and are not reliant on high-risk vendors. That is a priority for this Government, and that is why we are leading Project Defend. I was delighted to see Cornish Lithium for myself on a visit to Cornwall last autumn. Not only will that help us make sure that we have this critical supply of minerals, but it will boost jobs and growth in a very important part of our country.

Darren Henry [V]: I welcome the exceptional work done by my right hon. Friend's Department to ensure that the UK stands as an ambitious internationalist country, and in that regard I would like to know what steps she is taking to improve access for UK exporters to high-growth global markets.

Elizabeth Truss: We have signed deals covering 64 countries, including the Caribbean nations, where my hon. Friend is our trade envoy. Total exports to CARICOM—the Caribbean Community—were worth £1.5 billion in the 12 months to September 2020, and I am sure he is actively looking for new opportunities to use those trade deals to benefit people in the Caribbean and here in the United Kingdom.

Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential merits for UK businesses of the UK joining the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership. [912433]

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Elizabeth Truss): Joining the CPTPP is a massive opportunity for UK businesses. It will cut tariffs for vital industries such as cars and whisky, and it will help drive an exports-led, jobs-led recovery from covid.

Duncan Baker [V]: As opposed to the flat EU markets, we know that CPTPP markets are emerging and growing, giving huge tariff-free opportunities for those that join, so for my barley barons of North Norfolk, may I ask the Secretary of State what wonderful opportunities for growth access to these markets gives us?

Elizabeth Truss: I know my hon. Friend was delighted with our Japan deal, which gave more access for malt in the Japanese market, where we are the second largest exporter of malt. We will be looking for more such opportunities under the CPTPP for malt and whisky, to make sure that the barley barons continue to do well.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State explain the recent comments from her top adviser on trade and agriculture, Mr Shanker Singham? He said:

"I think it would be fantastic to get the EU into the CPTPP", which is interesting, but not as interesting as what he said next. He said that the EU

"would not be able to join at the moment...With their approach on agriculture and standards, it is impossible for them to accede."

Can the Secretary of State explain what he means?

Elizabeth Truss: I do not know what Mr Singham means. He is an adviser to the Government; he is not the Government. The important point is that now we have left the European Union, we have an opportunity to develop more innovative policies in areas such as agriculture. For example, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has recently launched a consultation on gene editing. We will be able to use new technologies to benefit farmers in Britain and across the world—technologies that historically the EU was averse to.

Emily Thornberry: I do not really think that gene editing was the answer to the question. The question was: what does Mr Singham mean? Perhaps I can help. I think he means that joining the CPTPP does not only mean eliminating tariffs on meat exports from other member states; it also means abandoning the precautionary

principle when we decide which meat imports to allow. If the Secretary of State disagrees on that, perhaps she will answer this: under the terms that she is proposing to join the trans-Pacific partnership, will Britain have the right to ban the import of meat produced using growth-promoting antibiotics?

Elizabeth Truss: I am sure that the right hon. Lady, being an avid student of the CPTPP, will have read the fact that the same standards on SPS—sanitary and phytosanitary—are in the CPTPP as are in the World Trade Organisation, which the UK has already signed up to. I have been very clear that in every trade deal we sign, we will not lower our excellent standards in the United Kingdom, and we will not expose our farmers to unfair competition.

Growth for British Businesses

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of the potential effect of her Department's trade policies on growth for British businesses. [912434]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): The Department's trade policies aim to support growth, productivity and jobs for British businesses. The OECD estimates that 6.6 million UK workers were supported by exports in 2015. In addition, the Department's recently published impact assessment shows that the UK-Japan free trade agreement could increase UK GDP by £1.5 billion in the long run compared with trading under WTO terms.

Simon Baynes [V]: Given that the St David's day debate is being held this afternoon, will the Minister comment on his Department's activities in promoting exports by Welsh companies, such as Ifor Williams Trailers, AE Sewing Machines in Ruabon, and the Rhug Estate's famous Welsh beef and lamb in my constituency of Clwyd South?

Graham Stuart: It is never too early to celebrate St David's day and the doughty exporters of Clwyd South, as well as the rest of the Principality. We are lowering barriers to Welsh exporters through trade deals, supporting them through staff in 119 countries, organising trade missions, providing online resources and championing them at international events. We have a long-standing relationship with the Rhug Estate, and we continue to support Welsh produce in particular, as part of both the Food is GREAT campaign and the Open Doors campaign, announced with fanfare only this week by the Secretary of State.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP) [V]: As the Government continue to hide the overall effect of their trade policies, the first official estimate from the European Commission shows that this Government's Brexit deal will cost the UK at least 2.25% of GDP by the end of next year. In addition, two out of three supply chain managers report experiencing import delays of two to three days. Is that why the Minister is going so far to remove questions and avoid scrutiny of this disastrous Brexit deal in the Chamber? If he denies that, will he now publish the impact assessments prepared for his Government, which have so far been hidden away from those who deserve to know the real costs to business and families?

Graham Stuart: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we are certainly not avoiding scrutiny; we are just directing it to where it rightly should go. He knows all about those who are seeking genuinely to avoid scrutiny. As I have been double-Drewed today, I pay tribute to the efforts he makes. All I will say as a final point—before I am cut short yet again by Mr Speaker, quite rightly, and even as I lose my attention because I am barracked so often by the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry)—is that he voted no deal, so it is odd for him to be complaining so much.

Mr Speaker: Of course, we would not expect the Minister to try to abuse his position.

Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP) [V]: Northern Ireland opposed Brexit, but it has happened. The protocol is its outworking, and it has to be made to work. The SDLP is determined to maximise the opportunities available to this region from being the crossroads between the UK and EU markets. We have written to the Minister seeking support in promoting Northern Ireland and this unique access. Will he commit his Department to promoting Northern Ireland to investors who are seeking access to both the EU and UK markets?

Graham Stuart: I commend the hon. Lady's positive attitude. She is absolutely right: whatever our views on Brexit, we have to get on, make the most of it and support our businesses, as she is doing, and I can give her that commitment. We will absolutely work with her and Invest Northern Ireland, which does a fantastic job in conjunction with DIT to promote both investment into Northern Ireland and exports from it.

Mr Speaker: Let us head to Yorkshire with shadow Minister Paul Blomfield.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab) [V]: I am no longer shadow Minister, but happy to be contributing to this debate, Mr Speaker.

Moon Climbing, a specialist rock climbing supplier in my constituency, tells me how, since January, new barriers have damaged its trade with Europe. In line with the advice of DIT officials, it set up a base in the Netherlands to avoid the barriers and it anticipates that that will

“be our main base from which we service both the EU and the rest of the world”.

I heard the Minister and the Secretary of State say earlier that it is nothing to do with them, but, frankly, companies expect the Department for International Trade to take some responsibility for trade, so what are they doing to prevent more UK businesses from moving abroad as a result of the damaging Brexit deal—losing UK jobs, GDP and tax revenue?

Graham Stuart: The British people decided to leave the European Union. We are supporting businesses, in Europe and beyond, but it is not overly complicated to accept that it is the Cabinet Office and the unit led by Lord Frost that are taking responsibility for those negotiations. However, we work actively, and we run webinars with thousands attending, and I and other Ministers participate in those to give people the tools to overcome the frictions that inevitably result from our departure. I am pleased to say they are declining over time, and I am confident that we will return to where we

were in 2019, when we were the only top 10 exporting nation in the world to see our exports rise and, the hon. Member will be delighted to hear, we overtook France to become the fifth largest exporter in the world.

Free Trade Agreement: Australia

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): What progress she is making on securing a free trade agreement with Australia. [912437]

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): The UK and Australia held the third round of negotiations for a free trade agreement between 23 November and 4 December. Discussions reached an early milestone of exchanging initial tariff offers, showing the momentum behind the negotiations. The fourth round of negotiations began this week and is live as we speak.

Neil Parish [V]: The Trade and Agriculture Commission report will be out next week. How does the Department see incorporating that in the deal with the Australians to make sure that we can maintain the high quality of imported food that meets our standards when we are doing a deal with Australia?

Greg Hands: I thank the Chairman of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee for that question. I know he takes a very keen interest and we also await with equal interest the publication of the report next week. It would not be proper to prejudge what may or may not be in the report, but it is clear that we are doing everything possible to support our food and drink exports. Returning to the question of Australia, we actually have a food and drink surplus with Australia. We are looking to get more market access and to promote more agricultural exports to Australia, which I know will come with a great welcome from him and the EFRA Committee.

Scottish Exports to US: Tariffs

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What progress she has made on removing tariffs on Scottish goods exported to the US. [912442]

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): What steps she is taking to seek a reduction on the US tariffs applied on the export of Scotch whisky from the UK to the US. [912449]

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Elizabeth Truss): We have been working hard to de-escalate this conflict and get punitive tariffs removed on both sides of the Atlantic. This is the way forward, not escalating the tariff battle.

John Lamont: US barriers to trade have been broken down in the past to the benefit of Scottish jobs, and this includes the great work of the UK Government to get Scotch beef back in American supermarkets for the first time in two decades. Does the Secretary of State envisage similar success in removing US tariffs to help cashmere mills in the Scottish borders and Scotch whisky distillers to export to American customers?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend has been a huge champion for Scottish goods such as cashmere and whisky. These tariffs are damaging on both sides of the Atlantic. Today, we are seeing the confirmation hearing of the new US trade representative, and as soon as that is finished I will be on the phone to her seeking an early resolution of these issues.

David Linden: Despite the pandemic, we have seen a rise in consumption of spirits in North America; this is taking account of the fact that there is a 25% tariff in place for Scotch whisky. There is a danger that some of the alternatives—for example, Canadian whisky or Irish whiskey—could move into that space, and that is damaging for all of us who support the Scotch whisky industry, so has the Prime Minister raised this with President Biden?

Elizabeth Truss: I can assure the hon. Member that the Prime Minister is exercised about this issue, as am I, and we are working flat out to get an agreement to make sure that these tariffs are removed.

EU VAT Regulations under DDP Terms

Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to assist British small and medium-sized enterprise exporters with EU VAT regulations under delivered duty paid terms. [912443]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): While VAT in the UK is a matter for the Treasury, and in the EU it is the responsibility of member states, my Department is aware of SMEs feeling pressured to supply on a delivered duty paid basis. That is a matter for commercial decision between contracting parties, but none the less, we provide support for SMEs through our international trade adviser network, and just last week we held a webinar as part of the UK Export Academy dealing with Incoterms in general, of which DDP forms part.

Andrew Lewer [V]: Many SMEs have EU clients that are themselves SMEs, which understandably do not wish to be importers and thus take on extra regulatory burdens. Due to the insistence on DDP terms, UK exporters have to try to reclaim EU VAT. I hear what the Minister says about different responsibilities and so on, but in his co-ordinating and supportive role, will he agree to meet me and representatives of the British Promotional Merchandise Association, to hear at first hand the difficulties that its members are having and to explore solutions, even if they are cross-departmental?

Graham Stuart: In a belated attempt to score some points with Mr Speaker, I will simply say that I would be delighted to do so.

Mr Speaker: You might slip on something; be careful!

Topical Questions

[912489] **Jonathan Gullis** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Elizabeth Truss): Earlier this month, I submitted the UK's formal application to the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership. Joining the CPTPP will put us at the heart of some of the world's fastest-growing

economies and slash tariffs for key industries such as cars and whisky. Membership of this high-standards agreement comes with no strings attached, with no requirement to cede control over our laws, our borders or our money. Joining will help propel a jobs-led, export-led, investment-led recovery from covid across our United Kingdom.

Jonathan Gullis [V]: I thank my right hon. Friend for all her hard work flying the Union flag with pride around the world. There has never been a more important time to champion the exporting potential of British business, so will she enable the Department for International Trade to partner with me so that I can ensure that the Potteries' world-leading ceramic tableware manufacturers, such as Churchill China and Steelite, based in Stoke-on-Trent North, Kids Grove and Talke, can benefit from support for exciting exporting opportunities?

Elizabeth Truss: We recently launched the parliamentary export programme, through which MPs can partner with DIT, and we will shortly be recruiting a second cohort of MPs; I know that the Exports Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart), already has my hon. Friend's name on the list. I also invite my hon. Friend to join our virtual Japan mega-mission, which is being led by the Exports Minister in the next couple of weeks and will bring Stoke-on-Trent firms in contact with Japanese companies so that they can sell their fantastic goods.

[912498] **Mary Kelly Foy** (City of Durham) (Lab) [V]: Can the Secretary of State say when the review of procedures for the resolution of investment disputes between investors and states in the UK-Canada agreement on trade continuity will take place, and how the views of Parliament and the public will be taken into account in the review?

Elizabeth Truss: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I am working very closely with my Canadian colleague, Mary Ng, to make sure that that happens as soon as possible.

[912490] **James Sunderland** (Bracknell) (Con): As we embark on our recovery from covid-19 in the post-EU era, will my hon. Friend provide the assurance that businesses in Bracknell need, and will he please outline what measures have been considered to improve the attractiveness of British exports?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): Bracknell businesses should be assured that we have a plethora of new initiatives to whet their exporting appetites. We are committed to helping businesses realise their economic potential through exports, and we provide a comprehensive global system of support to help them do so. There are a range of initiatives that enhance UK exporting, including our international export hubs, the £38 million internationalisation fund providing grants, and UK Export Finance's general export facility, another new initiative, all of which combine to help upskill firms, build their capability and finance everyday costs.

[912502] **Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab) [V]: One of my Saddleworth constituents who runs a small import-export business in woollen goods has told me of the difficulties that his business is facing,

including that there is no customs clearance agent in the UK who will take on new clients. This is in spite of the fact that he was told, prior to Christmas, that this would not be an issue. As I speak, he has bulk export products delayed in Madrid and Milan airports, Dublin port, at the Greece and Turkey border and in Tokyo. He says that the cash-flow implications for his businesses will be very damaging. This, of course, is all within six weeks of Brexit, a situation that he feels will eventually cripple his 19-year-old business. He asked me, and I ask the Trade Secretary in turn: why is this such a mess, and where are the grassy uplands that the Government promised?

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that they have to be short in topicals; we cannot go into full statements.

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will try to be as quick in my response.

I will pass on the hon. Lady's concerns to the Cabinet Office. The Government have invested considerably in customs and clearance agents. I refer her and her constituent's company to the different helplines that are available both from us at DIT and, most particularly, from Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and the Border and Protocol Delivery Group to provide practical assistance for her constituents.

[912491] **Steve Brine** (Winchester) (Con): It was good to see the Government's new Open Doors food and drink export campaign launched this week at the National Farmers Union conference, but I was rather surprised to see that only one in five food manufacturers sell overseas at the moment. Will the Minister tell me how producers in Hampshire can take advantage of our new international opportunities and trade deals through Open Doors and what support is available?

Graham Stuart: The simple answer is for them to go to gov.uk/growbyexports. There are educational masterclasses, meet the buyer events and the opportunity to send samples of their products to overseas buyers in specially selected hampers. Those are just some of the activities open to Hampshire businesses.

[912506] **Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP) [V]: With the Biden Administration announcing plans to end arms exports to Saudi Arabia, the UK is isolated on the world stage as it continues to sell arms to this barbaric regime. Will the Minister explain how this Government can claim to have the most effective export regime in the world when it has the moral stain of being virtually isolated in the world in its obstinate support for Saudi Arabia, which is a serial human rights violator?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mr Ranil Jayawardena): As I said earlier, we have one of the most robust systems in the world for arms export controls. All exports are governed by the consolidated criteria, and we have a proud record in this country of upholding our values. In the 19th century, we abolished slavery. In the 1990s, we were peacekeepers in the Balkans. We have always played our role in the world and we will continue to do so.

[912492] **Robbie Moore** (Keighley) (Con): It was brilliant to welcome the Secretary of State to Keighley when she met Tony Day from Marrose Abrasives; they are export champions, with products going worldwide. We have many brilliant manufacturing businesses in Keighley that are hungry for growth opportunities around the world. I would welcome suggestions on how they can get involved and influence future trade arrangements so that we can make exporting easier.

Graham Stuart: Is not it fantastic to hear that genuine enthusiasm for business, jobs and the prosperity that results? What a shame we do not hear it from the Opposition. I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State enjoyed her visit to Marrose Abrasives, and there are many opportunities before our negotiations with New Zealand, Australia and the United States. We have conducted public consultations. We have trade advisory groups, so through representative organisations and others, we are open every day to hear from businesses such as Marrose and make sure that their voice is heard and drives our trade policy objectives.

[912508] **Beth Winter** (Cynon Valley) (Lab) [V]: This month's figures show that the UK authorised arms sales worth almost £1.4 billion to Saudi Arabia. In the same month, the UN warned that the conflict in Yemen had taken a sharp escalatory turn. As several other Members have asked, will the Minister please explain why he has not followed the lead of his counterparts in the US and Italy and halted arms sales to Saudi Arabia? Does he agree that this behaviour has actively undermined efforts on peace talks?

Mr Jayawardena: As I have said, we do have a robust arms export control policy in Britain, and it is absolutely right that we maintain our own independent policy. The policies of the United States are a matter for the United States.

[912493] **Sally-Ann Hart** (Hastings and Rye) (Con) [V]: The strong British pound and economy attracted significant foreign investment when the UK was a member of the EU. Can my right hon. Friend outline the steps that are being taken to ensure that, as we come out of the EU and out of the pandemic, the UK becomes an even more attractive place to invest, increasing quality jobs and helping to turbocharge our economy?

Greg Hands: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. She is absolutely right; the UK is a great place to invest. The UK was the first major economy to make a breakthrough in attracting foreign investment, under Margaret Thatcher, now four decades ago. The UK has remained an extremely attractive place to invest since. In November the Prime Minister announced a new Office for Investment, jointly led by No. 10 and the Department for International Trade.

[912494] **Dr James Davies** (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): As our economy looks to recover from covid-19, there are businesses in my constituency that can expand globally. Will my hon. Friend outline what steps the Department is taking to help not just large companies but SMEs to access global markets? Will he join me in encouraging businesses in the Vale of Clwyd to attend the first local parliamentary export programme event on 4 March?

Graham Stuart: SMEs are vital to increasing UK trade, which is why we are seeking SME chapters in all our free trade agreements, and we provide a vast range of support for them. I congratulate my hon. Friend on being a trailblazer for the parliamentary export programme, and I encourage business people in the Vale of Clwyd to attend the virtual meetings that he is organising, chairing and using to ensure that his local companies get all the international sales support that Government can offer.

[912517] **Yasmin Qureshi** (Bolton South East) (Lab) [V]: Does the Minister agree that we cannot remain silent or indifferent to the worst crimes and atrocities, whether against the Rohingyas in Myanmar, the Uyghurs in China or people anywhere else in the world? Will she guarantee that the Government, although not supporting the genocide amendment that is coming to the House soon, will at least stop playing political games and allow a straight vote on the matter?

Elizabeth Truss: I agree with the hon. Lady that the atrocities committed by China in Xinjiang are abhorrent. The Government have taken firm action on supply chains and businesses doing business in that part of China, but expanding the role of the UK courts raises serious constitutional issues, and instead the issue needs to be addressed politically.

[912496] **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): Are we using our position at the World Trade Organisation to counter reprehensible trading practices by China and others?

Greg Hands: I thank my right hon. Friend. He is right to identify these unfair practices in world trade. Put simply, for far too long China has not been transparent, with practices such as industrial subsidies for state-owned enterprises, forced technology transfers and claiming special differential treatment. We will continue to work at the WTO and with G7 democracies to tighten the rules and ensure that they are properly enforced.

Mr Speaker: I will now suspend the House for a few minutes to enable the necessary arrangements for the next item of business to be made.

10.28 am

Sitting suspended.

Business of the House

10.32 am

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

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

MONDAY 1 MARCH—If necessary, consideration of Lords amendments followed by, motion to approve the draft Electricity Supplier Payments (Amendment) Regulations 2021 followed by, motion to approve the draft Electronic Commerce Directive (Education, Adoption and Children) (Amendment etc.) Regulations 2021 followed by, motion to approve the draft Automatic Enrolment (Earnings Trigger and Qualifying Earnings Band) Order 2021 followed by, motion to approve the draft Major Sporting Events (Income Tax Exemption) Regulations 2021.

TUESDAY 2 MARCH—Motion to approve the draft Pneumoconiosis etc. (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations 2021 and the draft Mesothelioma Lump Sum Payments (Conditions And Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations 2021 followed by, general debate on covid-19 and the cultural and entertainment sectors.

WEDNESDAY 3 MARCH—My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will deliver his Budget statement.

THURSDAY 4 MARCH—Continuation of the Budget debate.

FRIDAY 5 MARCH—The House will not be sitting.

THE PROVISIONAL BUSINESS FOR THE WEEK COMMENCING 8 MARCH WILL INCLUDE:

MONDAY 8 MARCH—Continuation of the Budget debate.

TUESDAY 9 MARCH—Continuation of the Budget debate.

WEDNESDAY 10 MARCH—Estimates day (3rd allotted day). At 7 pm, the House will be asked to agree all outstanding estimates.

THURSDAY 11 MARCH—Proceedings on the Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments (No.2) Bill followed by, business to be determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 12 MARCH—The House will not be sitting.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for advance sight of the statement and for the motion on Westminster Hall that he has tabled. I know that the Chairs of the Procedure Committee, the Backbench Business Committee and the Petitions Committee will be delighted, but it must continue to be hybrid while there are still deaths happening.

I am not quite sure whether the Government have decided when Prorogation will be, but a number of Bills are hanging around, such as the Environment Bill. Will they be taken before the House prorogues, or carried over?

May I make a plea on behalf of the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart)? I know that the hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) has been pressed into service, but the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire has had difficulty in attending today because he has a Select Committee. The business

is clashing. I know that he is trying to resolve it by consensus, but I think that some of the Committee members are not enabling him to do that. I wonder whether I could prevail on the Leader of the House to talk to some of his colleagues about that. The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire needs to take up his rightful place in this House. He has been appointed by his party, after all.

I thank you, Mr Speaker, for the excellent letter that you have sent to the ethics committee at King's College, London. I know that hon. Members and our staff—I am sure the Leader of the House has had representations—will agree about how appalling it is to send out fake emails. Our staff have been absolutely amazing since last March, getting stranded constituents back and dealing with distressed people who have absolutely nothing. Some of them have even had covid. They have had to handle working from home and a new type of working. They have been amazing. I put on record my thanks to all my staff, and to all hon. Members' staff. At a time when we have the worst death rate—182 per 100,000, according to Johns Hopkins University, while the US has 152 per 100,000—to have to deal with fake emails is absolutely appalling. I wonder whether the Leader of the House will join me, and perhaps the leader of the Scottish National party, in writing a joint letter to say that the House absolutely condemns that kind of behaviour.

Next week is Foreign Office questions, as the Leader of the House said. I wonder whether the Foreign Secretary will update the House on Nazanin's case and Anousheh's case. I thank Ambassador Macaire for raising Anousheh's lack of telephone privileges, but Amnesty International has identified two further British nationals: Mehran Raof and Morad Tahbaz. Could we have an update on all those British national cases?

The shadow Home Secretary has raised the issue that almost 1,500 people's claims under the Windrush scheme have not been paid yet. Only £4 million has been paid to more than 300 people. I know that the Home Secretary said that she wants to take personal charge of this, so I wonder whether she could come to the House and make a statement.

We gave the Government the powers that they wanted because we were in the middle of a crisis, but we did not know that they would throw an invisibility cloak over some of the transactions. I thank the Good Law Project for upholding the rule of law. It seems that only the Government's friends, those in their social circle or those in their economic circle need apply. An applicant can have no previous experience, such as the new chair of the Office for Students, but why does it take a judgment to publish the names, and what is a technical breach? I do not think that the judge actually mentioned a technical breach. The Health Secretary has been found to have acted unlawfully, so could he please come to the House and explain it?

We also need an explanation of why frosts are disappearing, literally. Apparently, after Lord Frost's new appointment to the Cabinet, he is on a leave of absence, so he is not accountable to the House of Lords. Yet he is now in charge of this new EU Joint Committee and he cannot come to the House. Could the Leader of the House say how we hold Lord Frost to account on the negotiations that he is having with the EU? Worse still, we had a press release on Friday from the Business Secretary and a written statement on Monday. He wants exactly the same kind of regime—he said "light touch"—for

his new research agency. Again, we are talking about an invisibility cloak, because apparently we cannot make a freedom of information request for any of the contracts that are given out under it.

I am afraid that this time I am with the hon. Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) when he asks for local government to be held to account.

What would the Leader of the House do if a councillor who worked for a Minister shoved through cabinet something that put a site in a Labour MP's constituency, without there being any criteria in relation to air quality, residents' views or even green spaces, when a site allocation document, which had been agreed and on which there had been consultation, stated that it should go in the Minister's constituency? What would the Leader of the House say to that person? May we have a debate on local government accountability?

Finally, I want to thank you, Mr Speaker, for your statement on Julia Clifford. We all knew her for a very long time; she knew lots of hon. Members and looked after us. You have made a lovely gesture in naming the Tea Room after her. We send our good wishes to John, Ben and Jack. May she rest in peace. She beat cancer but then, with a reduced immune system, succumbed to covid.

There is a debate on Welsh affairs later today, and I want to praise the Welsh Government because they have reached their vaccination target. They were the first nation to reach their target in February and they are now on the second dose, which they have given to 60,000 people. For Monday, "Dydd Gŵyl Dewi hapus"!

Mr Speaker: Before I call the Leader of the House, I want to reassure the House that I sent a letter to King's College on behalf of the House and copied in its ethics committee. What happened was appalling, and I am waiting for a response from the university. It was totally unacceptable.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Mr Speaker, I also thank you for your statement about Julia Clifford and the loss to the House and, of course, to her family. She was enormously popular and loved by Members. We pray for the repose of her soul and send our condolences to her family.

I come to the detail of the right hon. Lady's questions. The vaccine roll-out across the country has been a wonderful United Kingdom effort. It has been a terrific success. We are ahead of almost every other country in the world and this has allowed the road map for opening up to be brought forward. It is very positive and we should be very proud of what this country has achieved. That does tie into what the right hon. Lady was saying about the award of contracts, which needed to be done swiftly and effectively. That is why the vaccine roll-out has been such a triumph.

This infamous fox murderer involved with the Good Law Project is not somebody I am particularly interested in. He is fussing and wasting time over the fact that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care was getting on with ordering PPE rather than getting officials to spend time filling out forms to keep the fox murderer happy. I really do not think that is a good use of Government time.

As my right hon. Friend has said, it was a technical breach that was going to be put right in due course anyway. He was a fortnight late at a time when very

pressing business was being attended to. I am afraid that the Opposition cannot have their cake and eat it, although that is sometimes said to be popular. They want the success of the vaccine project, but without contracts having been awarded swiftly. That is a completely inconsistent position.

The right hon. Lady mentions that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has said that she will take personal charge of the Windrush claims. I have every confidence: when my right hon. Friend takes personal charge of things, things happen—she is one of the most effective people in Government at getting things done. It is reassuring that she will be taking charge.

The two further cases that have been raised must be raised with the Foreign Secretary; I will pass those on to him immediately after business questions. As the right hon. Lady rightly says, Foreign Office questions are coming up soon. It is important that, during those questions, the House shows its strength of feeling by asking questions about Nazanin and the other dual nationals who are held improperly.

As regards King's College, that was really deeply foolish behaviour. I do wonder what the point of an ethics committee is if it encourages dishonesty. Because that is what it is: writing to people with a false name is dishonest and it is cheating. It is the sort of behaviour that no respectable ethics committee would approve. I completely agree with what Mr Speaker has said and I am certainly happy to join in a letter with the right hon. Lady and the SNP shadow spokesman, depending on who that happens to be—the formal or informal one—because this is a serious matter. As the right hon. Lady rightly says, if there were ever a right time to do it, it was certainly not in the midst of a pandemic, when we all know how hard-pressed our parliamentary assistants were, and indeed continue to be.

As regards the meeting of the Scottish Affairs Committee, the Government do not have a majority on that Committee. It is therefore for the Committee to decide the timing of its meetings, although we generally find in this House that a degree of good will and compromise goes a very long way in sorting out problems—but that has to come in all directions, I think.

As regards Bills, Prorogation and all those exciting things, announcements will be made in due course in the normal way; you would expect nothing less, Mr Speaker. The Environment Bill has a carry-over provision, so every eventuality is taken into account. This is a Government who, in their wisdom, ensure that they are looking at all possible outcomes to make the legislative programme smooth.

Finally, I turn to Westminster Hall. The motion is down for consideration today. It provides for an extension to bring Westminster Hall into line with proceedings in the Chamber, and it is probable that we will look to extend that further, so there is no implication that there is provision until 30 March and that it then ends. The motion is very much to bring Westminster Hall into line with the Chamber.

Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con) [V]: May I associate myself with the comments about Julia Clifford? It is impossible to imagine the Tea Room without her, and it is wonderful to know that her name will live on and that we will all remember Julia every time we go and buy that cup of tea.

[Karen Bradley]

I thank my right hon. Friend for the motion on today's Order Paper about reinstating Westminster Hall. I recognise that it is a compromise, and every compromise that we have made during the pandemic has been difficult because of the precedent it might set, but it is absolutely the right decision and I thank him for making it. He has referred to the motions that will expire at the end of next month, and indicated that he is looking to extend them. Could he perhaps confirm whether there will be a road map out of lockdown for Parliament, much in line with the road map out of lockdown for the whole country that the Prime Minister set out on Monday?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend and I am very pleased that the reopening of Westminster Hall has been so widely welcomed. As regards the road map for the reopening of Parliament, the road map that the Government have set out for the country at large will obviously have an effect on what is going on in this House. Particularly important for the Chamber will be any changes on social distancing, because this Chamber will not be back to full, proper operation until the social distancing measures have been altered. That will be fundamental to any decisions that we have to make.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP) [V]: May I also associate myself and my party with the comments of the Leader of the House, the shadow Leader of the House and you, Mr Speaker, in relation to Julia Clifford? The proposal that has been made is a very fitting one.

I also echo the comments of the shadow Leader of the House in welcoming your letter, Mr Speaker, to King's College and its ethics committee.

When I stood in at business questions a couple of weeks ago, I said that I hoped the transition to my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) would be a smooth one, but it is not turning out that way. My hon. Friend would very much like to be in his place this morning as the SNP's shadow Leader of the House, but the Scottish Affairs Committee, which he chairs, meets at the same time, and Conservative members of that Committee are refusing to change the time of meetings to allow him to be here. My hon. Friend has already apologised to the Leader of the House and the shadow Leader of the House for not being in his place, and he was hoping to apologise directly to you in person, Mr Speaker. I hope that the Leader of the House can use his considerable influence to encourage Conservatives on that Committee to join in the spirit of co-operation and good will that is taking place in so many areas just now, to free the Perthshire One and help stop these pointless political games.

With national and local elections on the horizon, will the Leader of the House provide Government time for a statement to update the House on the democracy programme? Confidence in our democracy at this time, particularly in the circumstances we face, is more important than ever. This week we have had a number of discussions about the Government's procurement processes, which normally protect the public purse, but which are currently being bypassed under covid emergency regulations. Will the Leader of the House arrange for a debate in Government time to consider what action can be taken to improve transparency and to mitigate any increased

risk of corruption in line with their own anti-corruption strategy, and will he encourage Government colleagues to support my own Ministerial Interests (Emergency Powers) Bill?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman and thank him once again for standing in for the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart). The Scottish Affairs Committee makes decisions on when it meets as a Committee. The Government do not routinely interfere with Select Committees—indeed, their independence is part of the scrutiny process. I point out that the Conservatives do not have a majority on that Committee and therefore it cannot purely be the Conservative Members who are refusing to change the time, because if the full Committee turned up it could outvote them.

As regards the democracy programme and the upcoming local elections, the Cabinet Office will issue a statement in relation to campaigning and what will be allowed. This area will begin to open up on 8 March in accordance with schools. Obviously, it is really important, and most people would argue that democracy, as we show in this House, is essential work, and it is fundamentally important that campaigning is possible in a safe way in advance of the elections across the United Kingdom in early May.

On the procurement process, I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave the right hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz)—that it was absolutely right, during the height of the pandemic, that contracts were issued swiftly. The normal procurement process would take three to six months to agree a contract. That would have meant that we would not yet have a vaccine. It would have delayed absolutely everything. We would still not have personal protective equipment. The UK used to produce 1% of its PPE requirement; that is now up to 70%. That has safeguarded our supplies, safeguarded people, and safeguarded lives. It was right to act quickly, but the hon. Gentleman is also right that that expenditure must be checked. We have in this country one of the most honest public sectors of any country in the world. We have an absolutely excellent system through the Comptroller and Auditor General of ensuring that expenditure is properly checked and carried out and that there are ways of scrutinising it *ex post facto*. That is the right approach to be taking, but it was absolutely right to award the contracts during the height of the pandemic.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con) [V]: As the Foreign Secretary said at the Human Rights Council this week, our Government will continue to work with partners internationally to uphold freedoms of people right around the world, including freedom of religion or belief. Many women suffer persecution doubly as a result of their beliefs and their gender. Can we have a debate on how our Government are taking forward the declaration of humanity, announced last autumn in support of survivors of sexual violence in conflict, and on how to help prevent such things from happening in the future?

Mr Rees-Mogg: May I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend on her work as the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief? I cannot think of anybody better suited to the task. She has campaigned for this throughout her time in Parliament and does it incredibly effectively and persistently, and raises an

important subject again and again. I really thank her for that, because it is fundamental to how we see ourselves as a nation.

As my hon. Friend knows, the Government place the promotion and protection of human rights at the top of their list of international priorities. We condemn utterly and totally all acts of conflict-related sexual violence towards any person at any time in any circumstances. The Government do all they can to prevent conflict-related sexual violence and to protect all persons vulnerable to such violence, including marginalised minority groups and those of other faiths or beliefs, recognising that adherence to a faith or a belief can itself result in additional vulnerability. The Government continue to work internationally to uphold freedoms of people around the world and they are obviously particularly concerned about women whose rights are affected.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab) [V]: I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business, and echo the sentiments expressed about the very sad passing of Julia Clifford.

May I wish my Jewish neighbours, friends and constituents a very happy celebration of deliverance, as they commemorate Purim tonight and tomorrow? I also thank the Leader of the House for his communication to me and the Chairs of the Procedure and Petitions Committees regarding the very welcome reopening of hybrid debates in a replacement Westminster Hall.

I truly hope that we can secure ample time for Backbench Business debates on Thursday 11 March, as we have two time-sensitive debates lined up to commemorate International Women's Day and Commonwealth Day, both of which are on Monday 8 March.

Could we have a debate on the extraordinary practice of universities taking tuition and maintenance fee payments in cash from overseas students? This amounts to more than £50 million in payments taken in cash over the last five years from students from places such as China, India, Pakistan and Nigeria, and it seems to warrant at least ministerial investigation.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's support for various steps we have taken, and I note his appeal for the time-sensitive debates that he hopes to host on 11 March.

The hon. Gentleman raises a very serious point. It sometimes seems that anti-money laundering regulations make it impossible for a Member of Parliament to open a bank account but allow people to pay very large sums in cash in a dishonest way, and I think the balance is not quite right. We should perhaps ask King's College how it is doing on its money laundering when we ask it about the letters it is sending to Members of Parliament. He raises an important point, and I will certainly pass it on to the Treasury.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con) [V]: The impressive Gatwick and Manor Royal freeport bid has now been submitted. That would be an effective way to help to level up the area's economy, which has been devastated by covid-19. Can we have a statement on how such excellent initiatives could help to recover and regenerate airport communities and the UK economy more widely?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend has had a marvellous idea, as he so often does. His local bid for a freeport will be one of the many that I will be cheering on, including,

of course, the proposed freeport in Somerset. Freeports will be national hubs for trade, innovation and commerce, regenerating communities across the United Kingdom by attracting new businesses and spreading jobs, investment and opportunities to towns and cities up and down the country. Freeports policy brings together a comprehensive set of tax measures to incentivise private business investment, carefully considered planning reforms to facilitate much-needed construction, and additional targeted funding for infrastructure improvements. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government is leading a fair, open and transparent selection process, with successful locations to be announced in due course.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab) [V]: Coronavirus has meant that multiple measures affecting us all seem to be being rushed through with no meaningful consultation of communities. With Friday sittings now gone, can the Leader of the House advise me how, as an Opposition Back Bencher, I might be able to bring forward legislation to mandate maximum transparency and engagement on dramatic proposals such as major planning applications and reconfiguring our roads, some of which were dreamt up long before the new normal? Does he agree with such an approach, to counteract widespread feelings of citizen powerlessness?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful for the hon. Lady's question because it is a really important one. Some councils have abused the extra funding that has been provided and the ability to implement measures without proper consultation, particularly in relation to low-traffic neighbourhoods, and the measures they have implemented have caused great inconvenience to motorists and not much benefit to residents. She is right to raise this. The House provides many means of raising issues, and when we get back to normal—when that good and happy day comes—there will be even more ways of raising them, because this House is a very effective way of seeking redress of grievance and achieving it, as she is showing.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Year in, year out, our caseworkers do an immense amount of good work. That has been especially true during the coronavirus pandemic, when casework has gone up immeasurably. They are dealing day in, day out with parents' fears about their children's education, businesses on the verge of collapse and people frightened about getting healthcare treatments. So now is completely the wrong time for King's College London, endorsed by its ethics committee, to be sending many hundreds of spoof emails to Members of Parliament, which caseworkers have to deal with. I have seen an estimate that dealing with these spoof emails has consumed about 650 hours of caseworkers' time. Will my right hon. Friend join me in condemning this? The tradition in the House is to ask for a debate, perhaps in Government time, to discuss this important matter, but does he agree that it would probably be better for King's College to sit down quietly and dwell on the ethics of what it has done?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Cicero said something along the lines of "There's nothing so foolish that some philosopher has not said it." One rather feels the same of ethics committees: there is nothing so unethical that some ethics committee has not come to the conclusion that it is all right. I was appalled when my hon. Friend told me that 650 hours of time had been wasted, which shows

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

how deeply foolish the behaviour of King's College has been, especially in the context of the pandemic. This is clearly being taken up by you, Mr Speaker, but I hope the condemnation of the whole House rings out in the ears of this unethical ethics committee.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP) [V]: Throughout the pandemic, we have seen many civilian employees step up and go the extra mile to keep our country running. At the very outset of this pandemic, the military were called upon to run the covid testing facilities, with little time to train and limited personal protective equipment, on Operation Rescript. They then very quickly built the Nightingale hospitals. As ever, both regulars and reservists were ready to serve their country in a time of need. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is right that the contribution of the military be recognised and that a debate be held in this House on the Government's plans to recognise the service of the armed forces, particularly the plans to award them a medal for their selfless service?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady makes an excellent and, if I may say so, strongly Unionist point. Her Majesty's armed forces have played an incredibly important role in supporting us throughout the pandemic, from its earliest stages to assisting with the vaccine roll-out throughout the entire kingdom. I am sure all Members across the House will join me in paying tribute to the invaluable efforts the armed forces have made during the pandemic. We are committed to providing service personnel with the recognition and gratitude their service deserves, and I hope the establishment of the armed forces covenant in law by the Armed Forces Bill will go some way to marking this recognition.

James Grundy (Leigh) (Con) [V]: During a recent meeting with Leigh Miners Rangers rugby league club, I was pleased to learn of its bid for rugby league world cup legacy funding to help improve its sporting facilities for children and young people in my constituency. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this funding would be transformative for my constituency? May I also ask him for a debate on the cultural and economic importance of rugby league to regeneration in deprived communities in the north-west of England?

Mr Speaker: I would expect nothing else from the Leader of the House.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the issue of the work done by his local rugby league club for the people of Leigh. Sports clubs often show some of the greatest community spirit, and we should commend the many thousands of people who volunteer for them and offer local children, especially, a rich and rewarding experience. The Government have worked with Sport England to agree a £220 million package of support to help community clubs throughout the crisis. Sport England has also committed an additional £50 million to help grassroots sports clubs and organisations. We have provided £100 million of taxpayers' money to further support local authority leisure centres, alongside £300 million to support professional sport through the winter. In addition, there is a £16 million loan scheme

for rugby league. May I congratulate my hon. Friend and Leigh Miners Rangers rugby league club on the work that they both do?

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP) [V]: St Andrew's College in my constituency is one of many English language schools that have seen a significant drop in income because of covid. It has had zero turnover in the past 18 months, which compares with £10 million in 2019. May we have a debate on the contribution of English language teaching to our society and economy, and the urgent need for additional support in the Budget next week?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The Government support has been very widespread for a whole range of businesses—it totals £280 billion, including the suspension of business rates and the furlough scheme to help to keep employers in place. I appreciate the difficulties that English language teaching will have suffered from, particularly during the pandemic, in the absence of foreign travel, and I will pass on the hon. Lady's comments to the Secretary of State.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Con) [V]: Yesterday, the Union of Jewish Students and the Bristol Jewish Society held a virtual rally to call on the University of Bristol to finally take action against the lecturer David Miller, who brazenly states that Jewish students are an "enemy" that must be "defeated", that prominent Jewish people and organisations are a "pillar of Islamophobia" and that Jewish students who have the audacity to complain about his comments are part of a Zionist "lobby", which is a well-known antisemitic conspiracy theory. The rally was called after the university failed to take action, despite the complaint being originally placed in 2019. Can we have time for a debate on the need to improve university complaints procedures, which are failing Jewish students?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend brings to the attention of the House comments that are deeply wicked and the sort of thing that decent people simply do not say. We expect higher education providers to be at the forefront of tackling antisemitism, making sure that higher education is a genuinely fulfilling and welcoming experience for everyone. Providers should have robust policies and procedures in place to comply with the law, to investigate and to swiftly address hate crimes, including any antisemitic incidents that are reported. Antisemitism is one of the most evil creeds and thoughts. It has been a blot on the history of the world for hundreds of years and it has no place in our society. Universities must be part of ensuring that antisemitism ceases to exist.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD) [V]: I, too, welcome the return of Westminster Hall debates, so thank you very much. I also agree completely with the comments made with regard to the email sent by King's College. I directed the email to researchers and I am happy to share the responses I received if that is at all of interest.

As the host nation for COP26, the UK should be leading the way on ambitious climate action. Last year the green homes grant was trumpeted as the Government's flagship policy for getting to net zero, but mismanagement of the scheme has meant that only 5% of the allocated budget has been spent and the Government are now not

rolling over the budget to 2022. Can we have a statement from the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on how the Government intend to tackle emissions from homes, which are one of the biggest contributors to carbon emissions in the UK?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The Government have an incredibly strong record, including the 10-point plan that is the blueprint for a green industrial revolution. This includes over £3 billion of taxpayers' money to transform energy efficiency in homes and public buildings, about £3 billion further in grants for plug-in vehicles and funding for rolling out charge points, £2 billion to kick-start a cycling and walking revolution, £1 billion for infrastructure to enable carbon capture and storage by 2030, £640 million for a nature climate fund, £350 million to cut emissions in heavy industry, £160 million to make the UK a world leader in clean wind energy, and £100 million for research and development in greenhouse gas removal technologies such as direct air capture. All of these will have an effect on making the United Kingdom a world leader—the global first in terms of ensuring that there is a green industrial revolution.

Imran Ahmad Khan (Wakefield) (Con) [V]: Across the length and breadth of our great kingdom there is a yearning for justice to be delivered. In scripture, wise King Solomon delivered common-sense justice, but in Wakefield, the heart of God's own county, we are unable to hand down punishment upon wrongdoers due to the sad demise of our magistrates court. As a consequence of the pandemic, Her Majesty's Government have opened Nightingale courts to assist in mitigating the backlog that has developed, but this is only a temporary measure. Would my right hon. Friend find Government time for a debate on the need to open new, permanent magistrates courts, including one for Wakefield?

Mr Rees-Mogg: There are also wrongdoers, like my hon. Friend, who get confused about which county is God's own county. For the record, it is Somerset, not Yorkshire, nice place though Yorkshire is. *[Interruption.]* Lancashire, Mr Speaker, is marvellous too, just to make that clear, but only Somerset is God's own county.

On courts, £142 million of taxpayers' money has been put into the biggest expenditure in courts estate maintenance in more than 20 years, and £110 million has been spent on emergency measures to ensure that courts are covid-secure. There are obviously challenges ahead, and the plans to expand capacity include opening new Nightingale courts. With regard to Wakefield magistrates court, a decision was taken, following a public consultation, to close it in 2016. The reasons for that decision are a matter of public record, as published through the consultation, and the Ministry of Justice has advised me that it has not seen deterioration in capacity or workload that would mean wanting to go back on that decision. However, we have Ministry of Justice questions on 16 March and my hon. Friend may well want to raise this issue with the Lord High Chancellor.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Can I draw the attention of the Leader of the House to early-day motion 1342, regarding the tragic and unexplained death of a young man, Mohamud Hassan, following his release without charge from police custody in Cardiff on 9 January?

[That this House mourns the death of Mohamud Mohammed Hassan following his release without charge from police custody in Cardiff on 9 January 2020; offers its deepest condolences to Mr Hassan's family and friends; notes that South Wales Police has, as is standard practice following a death after police contact, self-referred to the Independent Office for Police Conduct; calls for a full and transparent investigation into the circumstances of Mr Hassan's death; recognises legitimate concerns arising from evidence that people of Black and Ethnic Minority ethnicity die at a disproportionately higher rate as a result of the use of force or restraint by police; and calls for systematic and institutional change to end racial discrimination within the criminal justice system.]

The early-day motion notes that this was self-referred by South Wales police to the Independent Office for Police Conduct. An investigation is ongoing. This is obviously a matter of significant concern to my constituents, but first and foremost to his family, who are also my constituents. Does the Leader of the House agree that it is crucial in cases such as this that there is a full and independent investigation that is seen to be so and that follows the evidence and the full facts without fear or favour; and that this is done comprehensively and swiftly to secure full answers for both the family and all the parties involved?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman raises a very troubling issue. All deaths in custody of the state are matters that should concern us, as those who believe that the state should always behave extraordinarily well to people in its charge. The death of Mohamud Hassan has rightly been referred to the IOPC, and I think confidence in our systems is enhanced by proper, thorough and independent investigation. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that that is what must happen—it must happen.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con) [V]: As businesses large and small need more orders to power jobs and economic recovery, can we have a debate on Government buying? Can we learn from the great success of buying so many vaccine doses from UK science and facilities, and buy more innovative and competitive goods and services from companies here at home?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My right hon. Friend, as always, raises interesting and important points. The Government are planning on creating a much simpler and nimbler procurement system, which will open up procurement opportunity to small and medium-sized businesses. However, I hope he will contribute to the Budget debate that is coming up, which will be an opportunity to talk about these matters at greater length.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab) [V]: The mortality risk from covid-19 among ethnic minority groups is twice that of white British patients, and the poorest areas of England have suffered more than twice as many covid deaths as the richest ones. The Government talk about levelling up, but without concerted action, these communities will continue to be disproportionately affected by the pandemic and its aftermath. So can we please have a debate in Government time about addressing these shameful health inequalities?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend the Equalities Minister is looking at the reasons for the higher rates of infection among minority communities, and is expected to produce

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

a report shortly on that. It is obviously important that we level up across the whole country, and that is what Government policy is dedicated to doing. It is fundamental that we ensure that everybody in this country has an equal chance.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con) [V]: Can we have a statement or a Government policy announcement authorising that more robust action be taken in future to reduce the risk of flooding? Are there not valuable national lessons to be learned from Somerset, which should now be applied elsewhere, including in Yorkshire—namely, that higher levels of river maintenance and river dredging do work in reducing the flood risk?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My right hon Friend raises a very good point—that dredging worked extraordinarily well in the Somerset levels. The Government have a major policy plan to deal with flooding, including £5.2 billion to be invested in flood and coastal defences—double the previous expenditure of taxpayers' money—which will protect 350,000 homes over the next six years, on top of the nearly 300,000 properties that are already better protected compared with 2015. So he has raised an important point and, yes, I hope, as always, the nation will learn from Somerset.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): Families are struggling across the country, and one of the biggest bills they face is the school uniform bill. A school uniform Bill has been brought in—a private Member's Bill—by my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury). I was on the Bill Committee back in September, and I know it has cross-party support. It is a small Bill that will make a big difference to families across the country. Will the Leader of the House set a date for that Bill to be brought back to this House, debated and passed, so that it will have that impact on families before September? Time is of the essence.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I can never promise that a Bill will be passed, but I said I would ensure that Fridays were brought back as soon as was practicable and possible. There are discussions going on at the moment, and I am full of hope that something will happen and that I will be able to make an announcement, possibly next Thursday, but I do not want to make an absolute promise of that kind.

Mr Speaker: There is a hint of hope.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con) [V]: Is my right hon. Friend aware that the Freeport East bid for the freeport at Felixstowe-Harwich is the biggest freeport bid? It will make the biggest contribution to levelling up, the biggest contribution to the UK economy and the biggest contribution to imports and exports in this country. How will the bids be scrutinised by Parliament after they have been decided on Budget day? Will there be specific Government time to ensure that the best bids are approved?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is very encouraging that there is so much interest from so many Members in creating freeports; that shows what an exciting and innovative policy it is.

There will obviously be a chance to debate that, and how it will be implemented, after the Budget speech—four days will be set aside for that debate—but all Government decisions are open to scrutiny by the House in its various ways, through oral questions or Select Committees. My hon. Friend is well aware of how effective Select Committees can be in holding the Government to account.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab) [V]: The Leader of the House knows that across this country of ours there are many parcels of land, especially in the industrial north, that have been contaminated by years of industry. Such pieces of land are sometimes looked at by developers with a view to building houses and so on. That often causes concern to local communities about the impact of contamination. I have been trying for some time to find out about the Turner Brothers Asbestos site in my constituency, and about the Spring Mill site just across the boundary in the constituency of the right hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), but without success. May we have a debate on the need for the right of access of communities when land that is contaminated, or thought to be, is being put on the market, or being put forward for development?

Mr Rees-Mogg: There are very strong regulations about the development of contaminated land, and there are some very successful projects between the public and the private sector to decontaminate such land. I actually visited one in the constituency of the right hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), where the Mayor of the West Midlands had been heavily involved in ensuring that a large brownfield site that had been contaminated could be brought forward for development. So there is a role for the public and private sector in dealing with this, but I can assure the hon. Gentleman that land that is contaminated will not be developed unless it is decontaminated first.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con) [V]: Will the Government find time for a debate on the importance of bringing civil servants out of London and across the nation, as part of the vital levelling-up agenda? Does my right hon. Friend agree that Stoke-on-Trent would be an excellent location for a Government Department?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It might be difficult to move the Leader of the House's office to Stoke-on-Trent, for obvious reasons, but I agree that it would be a fine place. The Government's Places for Growth programme is working alongside Departments to finalise relocation plans, as we work to ensure that our geography of locations covers as representative a distribution across the UK as possible, with the aim of having decision makers based in locations to create and distribute opportunities, jobs and investment across the country. I am sure that hon. Members welcomed the announcement that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government will create a second headquarters in Wolverhampton. None the less, it is important to note that that will not affect Ministers' commitment to their duties in Parliament. So yes, that is the policy, and Stoke-on-Trent is a wonderful place.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): May we have a debate on the Government's strategy for the Jobcentre Plus estate? Three years ago this month Glasgow saw a

raft of jobcentres closed, including three out of four jobcentres in part of the east end of Glasgow alone. Imagine my surprise when, only yesterday, I got a response from the Government suggesting that they are now looking at reopening jobcentres in large metropolitan areas. Does the Leader of the House agree that it was short-sighted for the Department for Work and Pensions to butcher the Jobcentre Plus estate, and can he confirm whether there will be a new temporary jobcentre in Glasgow?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I cannot confirm the precise location of individual jobcentres, but I can pass the message on to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. It is obviously important that the jobcentres are in the right places depending on need, and need will change over the years; it will not be completely static.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con) [V]: Unfortunately, I must report to the House disturbing information revealed online yesterday, showing the Labour leadership in my Dudley North constituency promoting anti-vaccination propaganda. Councillor Zafar Islam has promoted doubt and fear among my constituents at the same time as other black, Asian and minority ethnic community leaders and I have been trying our best to promote the vaccine to save lives. We are talking about a senior elected official who may have caused serious harm to my constituents. Will the Leader of the House agree to a statement on the leadership role of all elected Members in relation to the management of anti-vaccine information, and will he join me in condemning Councillor Islam's reckless behaviour?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is indeed reckless to subscribe to the anti-vaccine effort, but I point to the success of the roll-out of the vaccine in this country, with 18 million people now having received at least one dose. That has led to a decline in hospital admissions and a decline in deaths. It is an enormously successful roll-out, with extremely high take-up and no reports of any damaging side effects. It has been an absolute triumph of medical sophistication, and people can be very confident that the vaccine is safe, to their benefit and to society's benefit. People in elected office therefore ought to be really careful and think through what they say. If they say foolish things, they deserve to be held to account.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Every 62 minutes, somebody dies from an eating disorder, so ahead of Eating Disorders Awareness Week, which begins on Monday, can we have a debate about the issues of stigma, lack of understanding and lack of investment in adequate services for people with eating disorders?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady raises something that will concern the whole House. It is of great importance, and I think it ties in generally with the whole mental health concerns that we have across the country and the need—accepted on a cross-party basis—to do more to help with mental health. That is very much the policy of the Government, with mental health funding increased to £13.3 billion to 2019-20. I was not previously aware that every 62 minutes somebody dies of an eating disorder. That is a figure that will trouble the whole House and is a reminder and a reinforcement that our efforts in regard to mental health must go further, and I think that is something that has cross-party support.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I am very grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for allowing me to raise this very important issue. Could we have a debate in Government time on the future of faith schools? Ampleforth school in my constituency has had problems in the past, it is fair to say, but those are now behind it. Yet there are some in the education system who are using some relatively minor issues more recently as a pretext for the potential closure of the school. Could we have a debate in Government time so that we can send a very strong message that this House believes that faith schools are an important part of our education system going forward?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Faith schools are fundamentally important, and it is a right of parents to choose to have their children educated in their own faith. That is something of importance to all communities. My hon. Friend rightly says that Ampleforth has had very serious problems in the past, but I understand it now has a new headmaster who has reformed matters and that a decision is awaited from the Secretary of State on its future for admissions. I will pass on to the Secretary of State what my hon. Friend has said, but I absolutely underline what he says: faith schools are a right to which parents ought to be entitled. Speaking as a Catholic, I think that Catholic education is of very considerable importance and worth supporting, and Benedictine education is a particularly noble part of that.

Point of Order

11.24 am

Rob Roberts (Delyn) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Paragraph 19.21 of “Erskine May” states that ministerial statements are undesirable on Opposition days. Opposition days happen 20 times in a regular parliamentary Session, but today we have the general debate on Welsh affairs, which happens only once a year and is actually not a full day but only half a day. I would be interested, Mr Speaker, in your judgment on whether it is appropriate for three statements to happen on Welsh affairs day, meaning that our debate on all things Wales is going to be shoehorned into 90 minutes at the end of today’s session.

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Member for giving me notice of his point of order. He is right that “Erskine May” refers to a preference to avoid ministerial statements on Opposition days. There will be times when it is necessary to make statements on Backbench Business days. However, I do think it is unfortunate that the Government have decided to make two statements today when many Members wish to speak in the Welsh affairs debate in particular; it is an important occasion for many of our colleagues.

I am sure that the Leader of the House will reflect on that. I also know that the Backbench Business Committee will want to be mindful of potential pressures on debates. It has a difficult role in trying to ensure that colleagues’ requests for debates are met. I know that it will consider whether, on some occasions, a single debate may be preferable. I do not know whether the Leader of the House wishes to add anything.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Let me just say that this is the general pressure on business. People want statements made on important issues. There is demand, which you have to deal with, for urgent questions; I deal with the demand for statements and for Backbench business. I am very conscious of the desire to protect Backbench business, but the two statements today are both extremely important. It is the typical balance in a pressured parliamentary timetable.

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

11.26 am

Sitting suspended.

Education Return and Awarding Qualifications in 2021

11.30 am

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson): With permission, I would like to make a statement regarding the opening of educational settings, our plans to help children catch up and the arrangements we have put in place for qualifications.

The Prime Minister announced on Monday a cautious road map for the gradual relaxation of our current social restrictions. It is not quite the end, but the end is very clearly in sight. As the House is by now aware, the rates of covid infection have come down enough for us to let children go back to school from Monday 8 March. Secondary and college students will be back from that date, after being offered an on-site covid test. University students on practical courses who need to access specialist facilities can also return to campus from 8 March, and we will be reviewing the timing for the return of remaining students during the Easter holidays.

The Prime Minister spoke of a one-way road to freedom. For this reason, we have issued detailed guidance about what we expect all schools and colleges to do to welcome children and students back. A robust testing regime will be in place that will be critical in breaking the chains of covid infection. More than 4 million tests have already been completed across primary and secondary schools, colleges and universities. I know that staff have worked very hard to set up testing sites in schools and have had time to get used to supervising the testing that goes on. I know that the whole House will join me in thanking every one of them for the incredible efforts they continue to make to keep young people safe and learning.

Primary school staff will continue to receive two home tests a week, and this will be extended to private early years providers and secondaries, and secondary school and college students will be offered three tests in school and college when they return over the first two weeks, to be undertaken three to five days apart. Students will then be offered two home tests per week, so that they can test themselves regularly. Schools will be able to retain small on-site testing facilities for those who cannot and have not been able to test at home. Staff and students at independent learning providers and adult community learning providers will also be able to test at home. On-site testing facilities are already set up in universities, and staff and students there can take two tests a week.

We are following public health guidance, and advising that in circumstances where social distancing cannot be maintained, face coverings should be worn in secondary school classrooms as well as in further and higher education settings. This is a temporary measure to ensure the safe return of schools, and will be in place until Easter. All the other safety measures that are already in place continue to be robust, including bubble groups, staggered start and finish times, increased ventilation and strict hygiene measures.

This has been a hugely challenging time for teachers, staff and parents. The House will be well aware of the incredible work that has already gone into minimising the effects of this pandemic, but I know from research we have been conducting that it will not be enough.

Many children are going to need longer-term support to make up for lost learning. We want families to know that there will be support for schools and for our children. Sir Kevan Collins, our education recovery commissioner, will be working with parents, teachers and schools on a long-term plan to make sure that pupils have the chance to make up their learning over the course of their education.

As an immediate support, we are putting in place a range of additional measures to help children and young people across England to catch up. We are introducing a new one-off £302 million recovery premium for state primary and secondary schools, building on the pupil premium to further support pupils who need it most. We are expanding our successful tutoring programmes: £200 million will be available to fund an extended national tutoring programme for primary and secondary schools and tutoring and language support in colleges and early years settings. Two hundred million pounds will be available for secondary schools to deliver face-to-face summer schools. Schools will be able to target individual pupils' needs. The package will build on the £1 billion catch-up package that we announced just a few months ago and forms part of a wider response to help pupils to make up for the lost learning that they have suffered.

I would like to update the House on the next steps after we decided that GCSEs, AS and A-level exams, and many vocational and technical qualifications, could not go ahead as planned this summer. In January, we launched a joint consultation with Ofqual on the best way to do this, so that the results for 2021 are as robust and as fair as possible. I am very glad to say that we got more than 100,000 responses from students, parents, teachers, school leaders and other stakeholders as part of that consultation, and we have considered all of them very carefully. I assure right hon. and hon. Members that there was widespread support for the approach that we are taking.

Our priority is and has always been to make sure that every student has the best possible chance to show what they know and can do, enabling them to progress to the next stage of their education, training or employment. The most important thing that we can do is make sure that the system is fair to every student. It is vital that they have confidence that they will get the grade that is a true and just reflection of their work. This year's students will receive grades determined by their teachers, with assessments covering what they were taught and not what they have missed. Teachers have a good understanding of their students' performance and how they compare with other students this year and from previous years. Teachers can choose a range of evidence to underpin their assessments, including coursework, in-class tests set by the school, the use of optional questions provided by exam boards and mock exams. We will, of course, give guidance on how best to do this fairly and consistently.

Exam boards will be issuing grade descriptions to help teachers to make sure their assessments are fair and consistent. These will be broadly pegged to performance standards from previous years, so that teachers and students are clear what is expected at each grade. Doing this with a rigorous quality assurance process are just two of the ways that this system will ensure that grades are fair and consistent. Quality assurance by the exam boards will provide a meaningful check in the system and make sure that we can root out malpractice. We will

also set out a full and fair appeals system. It will provide a process to enable students to appeal their grades, should they believe that those are wrong.

I can confirm that no algorithm will be used for this process. Grades will be awarded on the basis of teachers' judgment and will only ever be changed by human intervention. There must, of course, be as much fairness and rigour applied to vocational and technical qualifications as there is to general qualifications. For those qualifications that are most similar to GCSEs, AS and A-levels, which enable people to progress to further and higher education, external exams will not go ahead and results will be awarded through similar arrangements as set out for GCSEs and A-levels. Where students are taking VTQs to go straight into a job, exams and assessments should take place in line with public health measures, so that students can demonstrate the occupational or professional standards that they need to enter the workplace safely.

All our children and young people have paid a considerable price for the disruption of the past year. It has knocked their learning off track, put their friendships to one side and put some of the wonder of growing up on hold. In short, it has caused enormous damage to what should have been a carefree and an exciting part of growing up. I am absolutely committed to the view that, with this programme of catch-up measures and the extra funds for tutoring, we can start to put this right. Together with the measures that we have set out for a fair and robust allocation of grades, this will enable young people to look forward to the next stage of their lives with confidence. Our approach in the face of the worst disruption to education since the second world war has been to protect the progress of pupils and students. Ultimately, this summer's assessments will ensure fair routes to the next stages of education or the start of their career. That is our overall aim.

In summing up, Mr Speaker, I am sure you would agree with my assessment that, as a nation, we have perhaps never valued education as much as we do today, and I commend this statement to the House.

11.40 am

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement and join him in paying tribute to all staff in our education system.

We on these Benches want to see all pupils safely back in class, where they can be with their friends and their teachers, and get the structure and stability that they need. It is not enough, though, simply to say that schools will reopen; there must be a credible plan that will not only enable schools to open fully in March, but keep them open.

The Secretary of State has failed to use the period when most pupils were not in school to put the necessary measures in place. In January he said that he wanted school staff to be in the next wave of vaccinations, so why has there still been no commitment from the Government to prioritise school staff? Does he no longer believe that they should be a priority?

Many schools have lost income or face higher costs because of the pandemic. Why has the Secretary of State failed to review the funding? One way to reduce transmission of coronavirus is to allow schools to teach on a rota basis. Labour, school leaders, and teachers

[Kate Green]

have all asked him to consider this. He has refused. Why? Ventilation has an important role to play in reducing transmission indoors. Will he update his Department's guidance to ensure that it is clear, robust and specific enough for all schools to implement it effectively?

Can the Secretary of State tell me why, months after Labour called for it, he has not made any progress in providing Nightingale classrooms so that more pupils can study in smaller groups? It is welcome that he has finally caught up with Labour's call to expand the wearing of masks in schools, but why is this measure only temporary? I worry that, in taking one small step in the right direction while leaving a great many other issues unaddressed, he is failing to do all that can be done to keep schools open and failing to work with, not against, school staff and their unions.

This year's exams were cancelled 52 days ago. For seven weeks, pupils, parents, and staff have faced damaging and utterly unnecessary uncertainty. The Secretary of State could have avoided that by listening to Labour and putting a plan B in place months ago; instead he was once again slow to act, with millions of young people paying the price. Now he claims to have solved the problem, but guidance from exam boards will not be available until "the end of the spring term", meaning more weeks of anxiety for young people and their teachers. He blamed a "rogue algorithm" for last year's fiasco, but the real cause of the chaos was not an algorithm; it was his incompetence. Now, for the first time, he has said that he trusts teachers. I cannot help wondering why he only trusts teachers when there is a chance to make them responsible for what happens with exams, rather than his Department.

I am glad that a wide range of evidence will be used: assessment materials will be available for schools; there will be guidance from exam boards on how to award grades; and individual schools will not be responsible for appeals. Is the Secretary of State confident that grades will be fair and consistent between and across schools? Why has he not used the past seven weeks to provide appropriate training to teachers? Is he not concerned that the lack of common evidence and of a link to an existing grade distribution both puts pressure on schools and colleges and creates huge challenge in ensuring fairness? Finally, on assessments can the Secretary of State update the House on functional skills and end-point assessments?

It was nearly six months ago that Labour first called for a national strategy to help children to catch up and to close the attainment gap, and I welcome the appointment of Sir Kevan Collins to lead education recovery work. I hope this means that the Secretary of State is breaking from the great Conservative tradition of finding work only for friends and donors. Can he confirm, however, that yesterday's recovery announcement amounts to just 43p per pupil per day over the next school year, and that just 500,000 pupils—fewer than one in three of those eligible for free school meals—will benefit from summer schemes? Can he tell the House why there was no mention whatsoever of the hard-working staff who will deliver this summer support, why there is no specific support for children's mental health and wellbeing, and why there is only limited support for college students?

This has been a challenging year for children, parents and education staff, and it has been made more challenging by the Government's incompetence. With schools set to open their doors to more pupils in a matter of weeks, there is a final chance to put things right. The Secretary of State must do so.

Gavin Williamson: I thank the hon. Lady for her questions. She raises the question of vaccinations for staff. She will have seen in the road map that the Prime Minister launched on Monday that the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation is to look at two strands. The first involves people who are most vulnerable to either being hospitalised or sadly passing away as a result of catching the covid virus, and we will be making sure that that is one of the strands that needs to be vaccinated out of those groups. Also, the committee will look at those jobs and professions—not just teachers but transport workers, supermarket staff and the many others who do an amazing job in public-facing roles—to see what the needs of those workforces are. I do not want to pre-empt the independent work of the JCVI, but we look forward to seeing what it says.

On the hon. Lady's suggestion on moving to rotas, that is not a route that we want to go down. We on this side of the House want to have all children back in full-time education. We think that school is the best place for children to be, and we think it is important for them to have full-time education in the classroom. That is why we felt that, when we were able to do so, it was better to welcome all children back into the classroom every day of every week.

The hon. Lady briefly touched on testing. Testing will be an important part of keeping classrooms covid-free. The roll-out of testing that has been happening over the last seven weeks has been incredibly successful. We have had some of the highest rates of uptake in testing of any workforce area and in any individual setting. Unsurprisingly, schools have readily adapted to the testing regime. So far, out of all the asymptomatic testing stations that we are hoping to set up across schools, colleges and special schools, 97% of those settings have set up asymptomatic testing centres, and obviously there are 3% that we are targeting resources and focus on, to ensure that they are ready to do testing for welcoming children back on 8 March. Testing is important for keeping covid out of the classroom.

I note the hon. Lady's comments on exams, and we will work with the exam boards and do everything we can to ensure that there is the maximum guidance, training and support for all teachers on giving the grades out and making the assessment of the correct grade. We have been working closely with the exam boards to ensure that this is done swiftly to support teachers. I know that they will be offering a broad range of support to all teachers and schools to ensure that teacher-assessed grades are done fairly right across the system. The hon. Lady makes an important point about having as much consistency as possible in the awarding of grades. That is why we have been working with exam boards to ensure that there is random sampling across schools and colleges across the country—both state schools and private schools—as well as ensuring that where there are clear anomalies and uncertainty, there are proper checks to ensure that there is no malpractice within the system.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con) [V]: I thank my right hon. Friend for the £1.7 billion for catch-up. It is a remarkable achievement that I hope will make a difference to our children. On exams, the decision to adopt centre-assessed grades for the second year in a row highlights the severity of the damage that school closures have done. Although I accept that it is the least worst option that the Government have come up with, my concern is not so much about having one's cake and eating it but baking a rock cake of grade inflation into the system.

Will my right hon. Friend confirm what the Government's plan is to ensure that we will not have a wild west of grading, and that these grades will be meaningful to employers so as not to damage children's life chances? When and how will we reverse the grade inflation? What is the rationale for not tethering this year's grades to last year's, or somewhere between 2019 and 2020? Why do we not embed quality assurance more broadly, rather than relying on random sampling or spot checks?

Gavin Williamson: I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments in relation to how we deliver catch-up. I also appreciate some of his thinking and ideas, which, as he can see, have been embedded in some of the policy work that we have been doing on catch-up. He raises an important issue about grade inflation. That is why we have been doing so much work with the exam boards and with Ofqual to ensure that there are proper internal checks as well as proper external checks.

We did not feel that it would be possible to peg to a certain year because, sadly, doing that would probably entail the use of some form of algorithm in order to best deliver it. That is why we have put a much greater emphasis on those internal and external quality assurance checks. We will work with exam boards and schools to ensure that there is consistency, but my right hon. Friend raises the important point that the best form of assessment, as I know he also believes, is examination. We want to move back into a position to bring exams back, as they are ultimately the fairest and most equal way of assessing all young people.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab) [V]: Does the Secretary of State plan to issue specific guidance on how factors such as the number of rooms in a child's home, the number of siblings sharing that home, and the level of access to IT equipment will be taken into account when assessing? Otherwise, how can any pandemic grades be judged as equitable?

Gavin Williamson: We believe that, when we are not in a position to be able to run exams, the best way of assessing the work and the progress that the child has made is for that assessment to be done by a teacher. The teacher's assessment and judgment is the best one to be guided by.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con) [V]: Like me, the Education Secretary married into a teaching family, and I know that he will join me in recognising the phenomenal work done by teachers and school staff in Dudley South throughout this pandemic, but the messages coming from medical professionals differ from those coming from teaching unions about the risk of teachers and other staff being infected if they return to the

classroom. What scientific evidence can he share regarding the level of risk that teachers are at, relative to the wider population?

Gavin Williamson: I would very much like to join my hon. Friend and neighbour in paying tribute to the amazing work of teachers not just in Dudley South but right across the country for the work that they and support staff have been doing, keeping the doors of schools open, welcoming the children of critical workers and vulnerable children all the way through this pandemic, and delivering brilliant online learning and remote education for so many of our children.

My hon. Friend raises a really important point. When Professor Chris Whitty stands at the podium and makes clear the need for children to be able to return to school, it is incredibly powerful, and it is something that the British people will listen to and that parents, teachers, children and all staff in schools will take real confidence from. There is an enormous amount of evidence to show what safe places schools are. I point to the evidence and data produced as part of the road map released on Monday, as well as the further information that the Department released as part of the guidance that we set out on Monday, which makes clear the importance of children being back in school and enjoying their education, and of school being a safe environment to learn in.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab) [V]: Contrary to what the Secretary of State just said, the scientific consensus tells us that we need to wait for cases to be extremely low and have a phased return of children to schools, yet he is sending 10 million children back into classrooms en masse. Staff have contacted me, scared for their health and their pupils' health and worried that the Government have not put in place the measures needed to make our schools safe. If he was on top of his brief and engaging with the profession, he would have used his time this morning to allay their fears. Will he take that opportunity now?

Gavin Williamson: It is disappointing that the hon. Member shows off the instinctive reaction of many people in her party that they do not want children to be going back to school. That is certainly not the case on the Government Benches. We have set out clearly a system of controls, working with Public Health England. That is why we have taken the difficult decision to introduce covid testing for not just staff at primary schools but staff and all children in secondary schools and colleges, to make sure that we keep classrooms covid-free and, working with Public Health England, to make sure that the system of controls is robust and strong to keep our children safe, keep our workforce safe, and keep our families and communities safe.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con) [V]: I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. Further education colleges such as East Coast College are preparing for and will arrange a return on 8 March, although organising three tests on site during that week for 5,000 students and 650 members of staff before moving to home testing will present a significant logistical challenge. I would be most grateful if he could confirm that his Department will work with colleges in a collaborative and flexible way to address this and any other obstacles that may arise.

Gavin Williamson: We absolutely will work with colleges and schools to support them, and we are not just putting the equipment at their disposal but providing the financial resources for them to roll out this massive testing programme. Colleges will have two weeks to conduct the three tests, and we have given colleges and schools the flexibility to allow students and children to come into college and school to take the tests before the official reopening on 8 March.

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): It is great to hear that all schools and all year groups will be returning on 8 March. Teachers across Keighley and Ilkley have been working exceptionally hard over the past months to ensure that children's learning has remained as unaffected as possible, and they deserve all our thanks and support, but some schools in my constituency are raising concerns about the roll-out and logistics of testing for students. Will my right hon. Friend do all he can to provide support for those schools?

Gavin Williamson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight that point. We have made a substantial financial package of support available to schools in case they need to bring in extra resources to roll out the testing programme. We have the one-week period starting 8 March, where schools can bring in those year groups so that they can get tested and straight back into class, but we have also given them the flexibility to enable students to come in earlier than 8 March if they wish to, so that they can get tested prior to the official start of the new term.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): The pandemic restrictions have caused much damage to our children and young people across the country. The Secretary of State has made bold assertions in the last 24 hours that no child's life shall be blighted, and says we have "never valued education as much as we do today",

yet his spending commitment to children's recovery is the equivalent of between 3% and 4% of the annual schools budget. Compare that to the spending on the discredited test and trace system, which was almost half the annual schools budget. Why is he not being more ambitious for our children by putting forward a more generous, longer-term package that focuses on their wellbeing and emotional, as well as educational, recovery?

Gavin Williamson: That is very much part of our overall plan for raising standards in education. We wanted to give schools a sense of what they will be able to do and to plan for over the coming weeks and months; we wanted to give them that immediate notice. We saw over £1 billion being funnelled into helping our schools and students straight away, topped up by a further £700 million. As I said, our ambitions do not stop there. We want to go much further, making sure that we deliver the reform and change that is so crucial to ensuring that children get the very best of everything in their education and that it is focused on them. That is what we are going to be delivering not just over the coming months, but over the coming years.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Before I call the next speaker, just a gentle reminder that I want to try to get everybody in, so I ask the questioners to be brief—and obviously those answering as well.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con) [V]: About 7% of children in England go to fee-paying schools. Those pupils also face pressures in learning at home, and many of their parents' incomes have been severely impacted by the consequences of the pandemic. What discussions has my right hon. Friend had and what guidance does he propose to give to the private sector to see what can be done to ensure that children in those schools also benefit from appropriate catch-up provision and good practice to that effect?

Gavin Williamson: It is important that we do everything we can to help all children, right across the country. That is why, especially through working with the Education Endowment Foundation, the guidance and the evidence is freely available and exists to support all schools, whether they are state schools or private schools. We will always ensure that that evidence, information, and very best guidance and best practice are available for schools in the private sector as well as the state sector.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab) [V]: We have seen a road map back to education done on the back of an envelope, and today—only weeks from exam season—it appears that detailed exam guidance will not be available until the end of the spring term. There is nothing concrete to account for differentials in lost learning, no details on the quality assurance process, nor any on how schools and colleges will be supported with the grading process at the same time as helping pupils to catch up. Will the Secretary of State recognise that he needs to bring forward detailed guidance this week so that pupils and teachers can adequately plan? If he does not, I fear that he is walking us into yet another shambles.

Gavin Williamson: It is always lovely to hear from the hon. Lady; I thank her very much for her comments. We have set out a comprehensive plan for the return of pupils to education, which is, let's face it, something that she will always be opposed to. She seems to think that the only thing that a school should do is be shut. In her time on the Front Bench and on the Back Benches, she has never taken up the baton for children in order to campaign for them to be in school. She seems to take the view that they are best at home. That is not the view of Government Members.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con) [V]: I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. As he will know, in November last year I published a report with Onward advocating a shorter summer break, as statistically that would help prevent the attainment gap from widening—which is especially important for disadvantaged pupils. Does my right hon. Friend agree with my idea, particularly as we help children who have lost face-to-face learning in classrooms due to the global pandemic to catch up?

Gavin Williamson: I remember reading my hon. Friend's report, which reached much more broadly than just the issue that he raised. He is right to raise the important issue of how we look at the structures in education. I very much encourage him to sit down with me and Sir Kevan Collins to discuss some of his thoughts and ideas. We will always be very keen to talk about the whole breadth of what can be done to really drive attainment for children, especially those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds.

Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab) [V]: I have been contacted by a number of concerned parents and teachers from my constituency, who have expressed worry about the safety of schools opening on 8 March. Will the Secretary of State assure us that he is doing all in his power to work closely with parents, teachers, the trade unions and communities to ensure that, when schools return on 8 March, sufficient resources and support are in place for every school to ensure that school staff are prioritised for the vaccine, to prevent further disruption to children's learning? The Secretary of State himself has previously said he believes that education staff should be prioritised for vaccination. Why is that not happening now?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I remind the House again that questions need to be fairly brief if I am going to get everybody in.

Gavin Williamson: I will try to give a brief answer, Madam Deputy Speaker. We always want to give assurance to those who work in schools, as well as parents and the children themselves, about the safety measures that we have put in place. That is why we have developed the current set of controls for safety in schools with Public Health England, taking on the very best public health advice.

Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con) [V]: Children's experiences over the last year will no doubt have varied greatly, but I am particularly worried about children with extra challenges such as dyslexia. Can my right hon. Friend tell me how we will ensure that all children who learn differently will receive the extra support that they need to catch up and reach their potential?

Gavin Williamson: That is why we felt it was so important to give some flexibility to schools and teachers, who will obviously understand their children and their individual learning needs best of all. Obviously, we rightly often look at some of the challenges of children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, but learning needs and challenges can vary regardless of what parents earn or the background they come from. That is why we need to give teachers the flexibility to target that support most appropriately to the child.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab) [V]: On Monday, the very day the Prime Minister announced his "big bang" school return, the minutes of SAGE scientific advisers were published. They recommend a phased reopening of schools. Another group of Government scientific advisers warns that full school reopenings could increase R by up to 60%. The devolved Administrations are listening to that evidence and taking a phased approach. Just last month, the Prime Minister called schools "vectors of transmission". Why are the Government now ignoring the advice of the scientific advisers? Is that not a reckless gamble that unnecessarily risks a spike in community transmission of the virus?

Gavin Williamson: At every stage we put the wellbeing of our children and those who work in schools at the heart of everything we do. We believe that children benefit from being in school. That is why we are very pleased that, by taking this cautious approach, we are able to welcome all children back.

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con) [V]: We have made much of schools, but we should not forget that a significant number of young people and children are in vocational education and on apprenticeships. I have recently been contacted by BCTG Group in Oldbury in my constituency, which is very concerned about the large number of apprentices who have not been able to carry forward their qualification because they have not been able to access functional English and mathematics courses during the pandemic. What work is my right hon. Friend doing to ensure that apprentices across the Black Country and more widely can access these vital functional skills courses, so that they do not get locked in and can finally achieve the qualifications for which they have worked so hard?

Gavin Williamson: My hon. Friend raises a very important point, and apprentices will be able to access these courses online so that they are able to complete their studies and their training.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab) [V]: Yesterday, the Education Secretary said that schools could hire more staff with £6,000 from his Department. Can I just ask the Education Secretary: how much does he think a teacher gets paid?

Gavin Williamson: I very much hope the hon. Gentleman got the copy of the skills for jobs White Paper that I sent him, which he had obviously not read when he asked his last question. He will also know that I am fully aware that teachers are not paid £6,000. Thankfully, as a result of this Government's interventions, starting salaries will be hitting £30,000 a year for newly qualified teachers very shortly. What we are doing is giving schools the ability to use that extra resource to bring in and pay for extra support for a few weeks to boost the learning and the education of children in lots of different settings. That might be on English, it might be on maths, it might be for sport or it might be for a whole different range of areas. It is odd to see a Labour politician not seeming to welcome the fact that we are putting more money into education, but maybe it betrays his true colours.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con) [V]: For the students at the excellent FE college Petroc in my constituency who were due to sit their vocational and technical exams, today's announcement will provide much welcome certainty. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, in continuing with exams and assessments in cases where students will need to demonstrate their knowledge to a professional standard, we can help them progress into a good job more rapidly?

Gavin Williamson: The point my hon. Friend raises is incredibly important, because we must ensure that those youngsters, and people of all ages doing those technical and vocational qualifications who need the ability to demonstrate their professional competency, are able to do so. It is absolutely vital that we open up our college system and open up our training providers to ensure that they can continue to progress.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab) [V]: Following on from the question from the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby), FE colleges such as West Thames have had years of underfunding, yet they

[Ruth Cadbury]

work hard to ensure that young people get the skills they need. September's new students will have had almost two years of disrupted learning and limited time in school, so can the Secretary of State tell the House what additional support the Government are making available for FE colleges?

Gavin Williamson: This was an important part of the £700 million extra funding that we have made available, making sure there is funding for FE colleges to be able to deliver and expand the tutoring and catch-up programmes they already have, but this is against a backdrop of increasing funding for our amazing further education colleges that we value so highly.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con) [V]: I welcome the statement from the Secretary of State. However, I am concerned that we are asking children to wear face coverings in the classroom. Will the Secretary of State confirm that adequate consideration has been given to understanding the impact this will have on a teacher's ability to interact and engage with his or her class, and what consideration has been given to the impact on a child's ability to learn and concentrate effectively? Will he set out the scientific evidence that demonstrates the need for secondary school-aged children to wear a face covering in the classroom?

Gavin Williamson: We always work incredibly closely with Public Health England at every stage. Obviously we, and I know my hon. Friend also, want to see the opening of all schools for all pupils at the earliest stage, and one of the key elements in assisting that smooth return was the advice that Public Health England gave us on the wearing of face masks.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab) [V]: There has been a lot of talk today about children and the apparently reduced risk in schools due to the age profile of the students, but I worry that alongside overlooking staff in those schools, we are also overlooking the urgent issues of safety and loss of education for adult learners in further education colleges like Warrington and Vale Royal College in my constituency, especially those on trade courses that really cannot be delivered remotely. How will the Secretary of State ensure that there is adequate catch-up support in place for further education?

Gavin Williamson: I refer the hon. Lady to my answer to the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) on the extra support that is being made available to further education colleges.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con) [V]: May I put in a plea for this year's year 10 cohort, who will be taking their GCSE examinations in summer 2022? We have plenty of time to consider what those exams might look like. Will my right hon. Friend set out the details of that as soon as he possibly can to reassure young people and, indeed, their parents?

Gavin Williamson: I can very much reassure my right hon. Friend that we are currently working with Ofqual and the exam boards on that exact piece of work right now, and we would hope to be able to share that in the not too distant future.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab) [V]: University students have been treated appallingly. They were encouraged to return to campuses in September with the promise of a normal university experience, only to be fenced in, fobbed off and unable to access rooms they had signed for. They have paid an estimated £1 billion for empty, unused accommodation, and the impact on their mental health has been dire. Students at more than 50 universities, including Coventry and Warwick in my constituency, are now on strike. Will the Secretary of State listen to the rent strikers and offer rent refunds and rent reliefs, and finally put an end to fees and the marketised higher education system that has driven this injustice?

Gavin Williamson: The hon. Lady is probably aware that my hon. Friend the Universities Minister laid out a set of packages of support for university students as part of a £70 million hardship fund. I would be happy to ask her to write to the hon. Lady with the details of that.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con) [V]: I thank the Secretary of State and the ministerial team for getting our schools reopened for 8 March, and for his statement. Notwithstanding the lack of national coursework benchmarking, is he confident that there are sufficient assessments in place to stop teachers being pressured by parents for grades and to prevent grade inflation? May I also urge him to ditch face masks in classrooms by Easter, as that is absolutely essential?

Gavin Williamson: My hon. Friend has always had strong views on face masks, and I very much note his comments. This will be reviewed during the Easter holidays. He is right to highlight the concerns about teachers being under pressure from parents. That is why we have put in an extensive and robust internal quality inspection system whereby the head teacher has to sign off and verify the results that are given by the teachers, as well as external assessment by the exam boards to ensure that the grading is in line with where it should be.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD) [V]: May I ask the Secretary of State for clarification on the use of fines, particularly in the case of parents who are immuno-compromised and worry about children bringing coronavirus into the home? As he will know, we still do not have evidence on whether the vaccine works for this group. The all-party parliamentary group on coronavirus was given horrific evidence by a parent who was told that she had had her life and should put her daughter's education first. Does he agree that that kind of language is unacceptable and that a compassionate approach needs to be taken in these extreme circumstances?

Gavin Williamson: I very much agree that that sort of language is absolutely not acceptable, and it genuinely surprises me that it would have come from any school or educational establishment, as they are usually so incredibly good at showing compassion and understanding. My right hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards would be happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss this in more detail. We saw, from September onwards, schools showing a sensible level of discretion in terms of saying, yes, school is quite clearly mandatory and fines can be

applied, but also showing some good sense in working with families to ensure that their children were attending schools and making sure that all risk was minimised.

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

12.20 pm

Sitting suspended.

Rough Sleeping

12.23 pm

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick): I would like to update the House on the Government's progress towards ending rough sleeping. I know that many colleagues on both sides of the House share my interest and commitment to this issue so today I am pleased to report that the rough sleeping annual statistics for 2020 have been published, and that the number of people sleeping rough across England has fallen for the third year in a row. In fact, we have seen the largest fall in rough sleeping since the annual snapshot began.

Across England, the number of people sleeping rough has fallen by 37% over the past year and almost halved since this Administration took office in 2019. I am heartened that this fantastic result has been mirrored in London, where there are particular challenges in tackling rough sleeping, but where none the less there has also been a 37% fall in the number of people sleeping rough. Some of our largest cities have seen exceptional reductions. In Birmingham, for example, the snapshot records just 17 individuals, down from 52 last year. A number of places recorded no rough sleepers at all in the statistics, including Ashford and Basingstoke.

These independently verified statistics are our most robust measure of rough sleeping. They enable us to estimate the number of people sleeping rough on a single night and to compare change over many years. As colleagues know, these numbers represent lives rebuilt, families reconnected and communities strengthened.

These encouraging figures highlight the success of our ongoing Everyone In programme. We launched Everyone In almost a year ago, at the start of the pandemic, with the simple aim of bringing in as many people as possible off the streets—reducing the transmission of covid-19, protecting the NHS and saving people's lives. By January, Everyone In had successfully helped over 26,000 people who were either sleeping rough or in very precarious accommodation and at risk of sleeping rough to move into longer-term accommodation. Through the programme, we continue to support an additional 11,000 people in emergency accommodation while longer-term solutions are found. In total, at least 37,000 people are in safe and secure accommodation today as a result of this exceptional effort.

Local authorities have each drawn up their own plans to support those accommodated during the pandemic, with our support and guidance. Those plans have been backed by £91.5 million through our Next Steps accommodation programme. Our ongoing Everyone In initiative is widely regarded as one of the most successful of its kind, and I am pleased that the United Kingdom has avoided some of the scenes that we have seen in other great cities and communities around the world, which bring shame on those places that could have done more. Research published in *The Lancet* showed that the measures we took in the first phase of the pandemic alone may have avoided 21,000 infections, 266 deaths, 1,100 hospital admissions and 330 intensive care admissions of homeless people.

Our priority now is to ensure that we maintain this momentum and end rough sleeping altogether. To that end, we will bring forward 6,000 homes for rough sleepers, backed by over £400 million of funding, over

[Robert Jenrick]

the course of this Parliament. That is the largest investment in accommodation of this kind, and I am proud that it will leave a national legacy of support for those helped by Everyone In.

Meanwhile, we will continue to invest in the initiatives that were already in place before Everyone In and are helping to drive down the numbers of people sleeping rough. Those initiatives were created before my tenure, and I pay particular tribute to my two immediate predecessors, my right hon. Friends the Members for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire) and for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid), who put in place and reinvigorated the rough sleeping initiative created in the early 1990s by another of my predecessors, the now noble Lord Young.

The £112 million of funding from our rough sleeping initiative this year has helped 291 local authorities, and further funding next year will continue to boost outreach teams, establish first-stage accommodation and introduce targeted support for mental health, employment and life skills, and wider support. We also continue to learn from and build on our Housing First pilots. The first three pilots, in Greater Manchester, Liverpool and the west midlands, are currently supporting over 800 people into safe and secure homes. Today, we are strengthening our commitment to Housing First through the publication of the “Mobilising Housing First” toolkit, which sets out examples of best practice and recommendations for areas keen to implement Housing First at a local level, using the funding that we have made available.

Over the course of the year, we planned and prepared for further targeted interventions to support areas with higher numbers of rough sleepers. This included the Protect programme to provide extra support to high-need areas, and the cold weather fund to provide additional covid-secure accommodation over the winter. Latterly, we have had the Protect Plus programme, which helped councils to redouble their efforts and, in particular, to ensure that rough sleepers are registered with a GP, are woven into the vaccination programme in their area and receive the vaccination when their time comes.

Westminster, a borough that faces unusual pressures—not least because of the very high numbers of non-UK nationals—has consistently had the highest number of people sleeping rough since the snapshot approach was introduced. As a result of this targeted approach and the exceptional efforts of the council there, we have seen very significant progress. The number of people sleeping rough in Westminster has fallen by 27% since 2019 and is believed to be at the lowest level in recent memory.

In recognition of how instrumental the community, charity and faith sectors have been to our national effort, I am today announcing further funding for the voluntary sector to support their work. That will help local community night shelters to provide accommodation that is covid secure in time for this autumn, in case that is needed, and is dignified and focused on sensible, sustainable housing solutions for rough sleepers. It will also support Homeless Link, Housing Justice, StreetLink, St Basils and the National Homelessness Advice Service delivered by Shelter. I pay particular tribute to all those and many other community and charitable organisations.

Taken together, these interventions have led to a dramatic reduction in rough sleeping of a kind not seen in many years. The additional data my Department has published today shows that the number of people sleeping

rough on a single night has continued to fall since the annual snapshot. Over the winter period, numbers have fallen to 1,743 in December and to just 1,461 in January. Many of the individuals will have been offered accommodation, but will not have chosen to accept it for a wide range of reasons.

While those are not official statistics of the kind of the November count that is also published today, they demonstrate the incredible achievements of council officers and outreach staff, who have been at the frontline of tackling rough sleeping in the past few months, operating under extraordinary circumstances to meet the demands of the extremely cold weather that we have seen recently. Their work is often unglamorous and unnoticed, and I pay huge tribute to them for what they have achieved.

We have made great strides over the past 12 months, but we do not view that as an end in itself; it is only a beginning. In the next financial year, we will be spending more than £750 million to continue tackling homelessness and rough sleeping so that everyone who has been extended a helping hand off the streets during the pandemic has no need to return to them again.

Our ambition is that no one should need to sleep rough. To achieve that, we must raise the safety net from the street and address the causes of rough sleeping. We believe rough sleeping is a symptom of family breakdown, of domestic abuse, of the treatment of ex-offenders, of the historical inadequacies of our immigration system and, above all, of poor health, substance misuse and poor mental health.

At the heart of the strategy that we will be laying out in the weeks and months to come will be the marriage of health and housing. The partnership between those is surely one of the central lessons of this pandemic. We will fortify those partnerships between local homelessness and health services, and between central and local government and the NHS, all of which have been strengthened enormously over the course of this year. I will work closely with the Department of Health and Social Care to tackle drug and alcohol addiction and mental health, and with the Ministry of Justice to ensure that prison leavers have access to housing upon release. We will seize this opportunity to build back better—not merely mending or returning to a status quo ante, but building a better country post-covid-19, in which no one needs to sleep rough. I commend this statement to the House.

12.34 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab) [V]: The Government promised to bring everyone in, but these figures show that at least 2,688 people spent the pandemic on the streets, and every person on the streets is a policy failure. That figure is likely to be a major underestimation. Figures for London put the true number at more than four times today’s estimate. First, will the Housing Secretary commit to providing a richer and more frequent picture of homelessness and rough sleeping across the country?

Even before the crisis, rough sleeping was a shameful sign of Government failure, and we went into last year with more than twice as many rough sleepers as in 2010. The picture on wider homelessness is even worse. There are a quarter of a million homeless people in England, of whom almost 130,000 are children, and the situation

is even worse in SNP-run Scotland, where the number of people in temporary accommodation has reached an all-time high.

Nobody should be sleeping rough, especially during a pandemic, so can the Secretary of State tell the House why he thinks that 2,500 people fell through the gaps and had their health and wellbeing exposed at the height of the pandemic? Is it because the Government refused to suspend “no recourse to public funds”, as Labour has called for? The UK Government have continued to leave local authorities in the impossible situation of having unclear guidance and no funding to help those most at risk. Could it be because the initial commitment to provide councils with “whatever it takes” was abandoned, and they are now being asked to raise council tax to pay for essential services? Could it be because the Government have failed to prevent people from becoming homeless and arriving on the streets during a pandemic?

Councils and local authorities should be rightly congratulated on their hard work—and I do congratulate them—in these extremely challenging circumstances, often despite unclear Government guidance, but there is a real risk that gains made last year will be lost. None of the funding mentioned by the Secretary of State today appears to be new. Meanwhile, the Government have quietly scaled back support for Everyone In, which brought down rough sleeping numbers. There are currently 11,000 people in emergency accommodation. However, the Government have promised only 6,000 new housing units for rough sleepers. What will happen to the other 5,000 people in emergency accommodation right now, or the 26,000 people in move-on accommodation or precarious private rented sector homes where they have no security and face homelessness again when their contracts run out in as little as six or 12 months? The Housing Secretary mentioned his commitment to Housing First, so why did the Government extend the pilots to 2023, rather than just rolling out the approach now?

We cannot return to business as usual. The Government pledged to end rough sleeping for good, but their consistent refusal to address the root causes means that more people will continue to arrive on the streets every day. The Government said this morning that the increase in rough sleepers is likely to be down to people losing their jobs and being unable to pay rent. Unemployment is predicted to soar, with 190,000 private renters set to lose their jobs by the summer, so why have the Government once again frozen local housing allowance, given that 700,000 universal credit claimants already cannot cover their rent?

Will the Secretary of State close the loopholes in the so-called eviction ban, which have resulted in at least 500 people being evicted from their homes over winter? Will he commit to ending section 21, to give people security in their homes and prevent the leading cause of homelessness, as he said he would? Will he commit to providing the additional truly affordable housing that will be essential to finding permanent homes for people in temporary accommodation? Finally, the Government’s former rough sleeping tsar, Louise Casey, has criticised the Government for failing to grasp the scale of the crisis, the consequences for lives and life chances, the urgency of the need and the scope for solving it. The public want this. Will he heed her words?

Robert Jenrick: I will try to answer as many of the hon. Lady’s questions as I can. I was sad that she could not be more fulsome in welcoming the achievements

that have been made over the past year, because they are not just the achievements of this Government; they are the shared achievements of charities, local councils, volunteers and faith groups across the country. We have worked very productively across party lines with local government. In the remarks I have made and those I will no doubt make in answer to other questions today, I praise the councils that have made tremendous efforts—councils such as Birmingham City Council, which has gone to huge lengths to reduce the number of people sleeping rough. This is and should be an issue that cuts across party lines.

The hon. Lady says that the statistics published today are not her chosen method of measuring rough sleeping. She and others have made that point in the past, but this methodology has existed for well over 10 years. It is the most trusted measure of rough sleeping. It is independently verified by Homeless Link, and it uses a very similar methodology to that used by other developed countries such as Canada and France. I think she refers to the CHAIN—Combined Homelessness and Information Network—which is a different methodology and is not easily comparable. That takes an estimate of the number of individuals sleeping rough over a quarter, rather than on an individual night. I am confident that ours is the best way forward, although I am always open to suggestions on different ways one might choose to measure it. By any account, an enormous step forward has been made over the past year; I have not heard anyone who truly understands this issue dispute that.

The hon. Lady says that Everyone In came to an end and that we have not brought forward further support, but that is not correct. Everyone In is ongoing. As I have said, we now have 37,000 people who would otherwise have been sleeping rough on the streets of this country either already moved into good quality sustainable accommodation, be it in the private rented sector, in move-on accommodation or in social housing, or awaiting that move, with councils working closely on it. All those people also have wraparound care, looking after their mental health and other health issues they might face, to ensure that they can begin to rebuild their lives and become more productive members of society.

The hon. Lady also says that councils have not got the funding they need for the future, but again that is not correct. We have provided at the spending review a 60% increase in the amount of Government spending on rough sleeping and homelessness services, bringing it to more than £750 million in the next financial year. This is not primarily now an issue about funding; it is an issue about delivery and commitment, and there are wide variances across the country between councils that are grasping that and those that still have more work to do.

The hon. Lady has argued in the past that we should not take the targeted approach that we did this winter and that we should have more of a scattergun approach across the country. We rejected that advice and decided to focus resources and effort on the places where it was really required. The statistics I am publishing today—both the snapshot and the statistics for December and January—validate that approach, because they show that in some parts of the country, such as Westminster, that extra effort has made all the difference. I praise the individual council leaders we have worked with, again on a cross-party basis, be it Rachael Robathan in Westminster or Georgia Gould in Camden, whose support has been much

[Robert Jenrick]

appreciated. I hope that we can work across party lines over the course of this year. I hope I can work with the hon. Lady, and I see opposite me her predecessor, the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), who made a great contribution on this issue when he was the shadow Housing Minister. We want now to move forward to capitalise on the immense efforts and achievements of the past year, and to end rough sleeping once and for all.

Adam Holloway (Gravesham) (Con): I wonder whether the Secretary of State shares my frustration at the constant attempts to weaponise rough sleepers as an example of wider ills in our society. He knows very well that the rough sleepers are primarily—99% of them—people who are mentally ill, people who have addiction problems, or, normally, both. I would love to hear some examples of how his new initiatives will work on the ground to build on the success of Everyone In. Finally, it is great to see a Secretary of State who actually realises that in a civilised society the only people who should be on the streets are those who choose to be.

Robert Jenrick: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his very long-standing commitment to this issue. On one of my first nights in this post, he and I went out on to the streets in the west end, and it was one of the most interesting and important visits I have made over the past 18 months. He is right to say that our ambition should be that in a civilised society nobody should feel the need to sleep rough on the streets and that we should be addressing the causes of rough sleeping, which I think are primarily related to health; this is about drugs, alcohol misuse and mental health. We need to be tackling those causes, which is what we intend to do over the course of this year, bringing together the relevant parts of government to have the most coherent, holistic strategy we have ever had. The statistics speak for themselves: 60% of those sleeping rough have serious substance misuse issues; 49% need drugs support; 23% need alcohol support; and 82% have mental health vulnerabilities. So that has to be our focus going forward: the marriage of health and housing, for the first time.

My hon. Friend also makes a point, which was alluded to by the shadow spokesperson, about why we had not managed to get every individual off the streets even during the height of our efforts with Everyone In. There are some people who, for a range of reasons, are exceptionally difficult to persuade to come in off the streets. Sadly, we will never live in a country where there is not a single person sleeping rough on the streets, but the litmus test for a civilised society must be that nobody has the need to do so and that everybody is offered support swiftly—this is about not so much no second night out as no first night out.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP) [V]: Any progress on tackling rough sleeping is to be welcomed. Indeed, rough sleeping in Scotland is at a record low, thanks to the concerted efforts of frontline homelessness services, local authorities and the Scottish Government to move people off the streets since the start of the pandemic, having invested £32.5 million—more than half—of their £50 million Ending Homelessness

Together action plan to support local authorities to prioritise settled accommodation for all, provided £60 million to fully mitigate the unjust Tory bedroom tax for over 70,000 Scottish households, and delivered almost 97,000 affordable homes since 2007, in contrast to Scotland's previous Labour-Lib Dem Administration, who built only six council houses in seven years. With the limited powers at their disposal, the Scottish Government are doing all they can to tackle rough sleeping and homelessness with increased urgency during this health pandemic.

In reality, however, the fact is that poverty often leads to debt, and debt is a genuine factor in homelessness. If the Secretary of State really wants to prioritise rough sleeping and homelessness and raise the safety net, as he has said, he could use his reserved powers to at least maintain the local housing allowance increase beyond March 2021, instead of freezing it next year. He could suspend the shared accommodation rate for under-35s. He could make permanent the £20 uplift to universal credit and the working tax credit, and extend an equivalent uplift to people claiming legacy benefits who have unjustly been denied this lifeline. We know that this is important as the removal of the uplift will push a further 60,000 people into poverty. He could also cover the average cost of rents to ensure that people are supported to stay in their homes. If the Secretary of State is really serious about raising the safety net, will he at least work to implement these measures as quickly as possible?

Robert Jenrick: I am interested to hear the hon. Lady's comments, and, of course, we are committed to working with anybody who takes an interest in this issue and shares our commitment to it across the United Kingdom. We have put in place unprecedented amounts of money to support this issue and to care for the most vulnerable people in our society. The Scottish Government, through Barnett consequentials, will receive their share of the funding that I have set out: £750 million in England for homelessness and rough sleeping—a 60% increase on the previous spending period, so it is a very substantial increase. A year ago, we uplifted the local housing allowance to the 30th percentile, providing further support equivalent to around £600 a year for a household, which will have ensured that many households have found it much easier to survive the challenges of the last year.

The other questions that the hon. Lady refers to, in respect of universal credit, are no doubt ones that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor will consider as he prepares for his Budget.

Simon Jupp (East Devon) (Con) [V]: I am proud of this Government's commitment to end rough sleeping for good and the multimillion-pound investment in Exeter, which has helped 85% of rough sleepers in the city to move into more permanent housing. This Conservative Government's Everyone In programme has supported tens of thousands of people without a home through this pandemic. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we must build on this success and ensure that those helped are now able to secure a place that they can really call home?

Robert Jenrick: I praise the local councils in my hon. Friend's area, such as Exeter, for the good work that they have done, and East Devon District Council; we have seen the snapshot fall to a decrease there as well.

Significant progress is being made in all parts of the country. He is absolutely right that we now need to ensure that those individuals we have helped off the streets can be moved into better accommodation. We have made very good progress in that respect, despite all the challenges of the year. Over 26,000 people who were brought in off the streets into emergency accommodation are already in more secure accommodation. That is quite an achievement, considering the constraints on capacity in local authorities. There are now a further group of individuals—currently around 11,000—that we have to ensure make the same transition, and that is the focus for my Department and those local councils in the months ahead.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab) [V]: I thank the Secretary of State for the statement. Looking back to last March, it is undeniable that the Everyone In initiative was a success, and I congratulate the councils, the charities, the Government and, of course, Dame Louise Casey. It was successful because it did precisely what it said: everyone, without exception, was taken off the streets and found accommodation. Does “Everyone In” still mean that while there is a public health emergency, councils have the right and the responsibility to house everyone, including those with no recourse to public funds? Recently, local authorities have told the Select Committee that there is a great deal of confusion about their legal position. Does the Secretary of State accept that if those with no recourse to public funds are not housed, “Everyone In” will have to be renamed “Some people in, and others left outside”? Surely that cannot be acceptable.

Robert Jenrick: I am grateful to the Chair of the Select Committee. In the light of the health emergency we were in, and that in many respects we remain in today, we took the decision to advise local councils that although the law remains unchanged with respect to “no recourse to public funds”, they should take into account the health emergency, and more recently the winter weather we have been experiencing, and they should offer a compassionate response to people regardless of their circumstances or their country of origin. That is what local councils have done. Thousands of individuals who do not have recourse to public funds have been supported through the Everyone In programme. I have met some of them—just a week ago, I was with Westminster City Council in Bayswater, where I met members of the public who had been supported into safe accommodation, some of whom did not have recourse to public funds.

As we leave the health emergency, thanks to the success we are making of the vaccine programme, the law will remain unchanged. It is important that we have a robust immigration policy, as other countries have. I am working closely with my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary to establish how we can use our new-found powers as we leave the European Union to create an immigration policy that does not attract individuals to this country, but that, if people do come here and find themselves in the precarious position of living on the streets, helps them in a compassionate way to return to their home country and to rebuild their lives there.

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): We recently announced that across my constituency, for a period of time we had no rough sleepers on our streets. I thank my right hon. Friend and his team for their support in helping to

secure more than £4 million, for which I lobbied, to be received by charities and our local council to tackle homelessness in Watford. Will he join me in thanking our incredible local charities, including New Hope and One YMCA, for their tireless efforts over many years, and continuing today, to end homelessness and to transform lives for the better?

Robert Jenrick: I am only too happy to praise the local organisations in my hon. Friend’s constituency, such as New Hope and One YMCA. As I said earlier, those who work on the frontline of tackling rough sleeping—support workers, volunteers in soup kitchens, local council staff and those working in many other spheres—are incredibly brave, courageous people who are doing great and noble work, which often goes unnoticed. They deserve our respect and recognition today, as we see the fruits of their hard work in the statistics that have been published.

My hon. Friend’s constituency is one of a number that have recently reported zero rough sleepers. I named some others in my statement, such as Ashford and Basingstoke, where people had been sleeping rough but the latest count recorded none at all. That is an incredible step forward. I praise those parts of the country and I expect more to follow suit in the years ahead.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind) [V]: 2020 saw the deaths of 976 rough sleepers on the streets of this country. That is a scandal, as indeed is any rough sleeping. Will the Secretary of State look with more care at the reasons why people are sleeping rough, including unfair evictions in the private sector and inappropriate use of the “intentionally homeless” rules? Regarding those who are temporarily housed in hostels, does he understand the stress they feel from not knowing what the future will bring? A hostel is a roof over their head on a temporary basis; what we need is investment—big investment now—in council housing, so that move-on accommodation can give people a secure, permanent roof over their head. The best way of achieving that is through the construction of lifetime tenancy council housing at social rents. Will the Secretary of State commit this Government to building the council houses that are necessary all over the country?

Robert Jenrick: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. We are very committed to building more homes. We want to build more homes than any Government before—homes of all types and tenures and in all parts of the country, including inner-city areas such as Islington, which he represents. That is why we have taken steps such as enabling councils to borrow, and we are supporting them through our record affordable homes programme worth £11.5 billion to build more social homes, affordable homes and homes for shared ownership.

The right hon. Gentleman rightly makes the point that we need more move-on accommodation. That is why I persuaded my right hon. Friend the Chancellor last year to bring forward the £430 million that we needed to invest in 6,000 new units of move-on accommodation. They will be in all parts of the country and every council, including his own, has been able to participate in that programme. Those homes will be built or acquired over the next few years. He is right to say that more work needs to be done, but I politely point out to him that enormous progress is being made

[Robert Jenrick]

in his own local council, Islington. The count a year ago was 59 individuals. The count for November, which we are releasing today, was 20—so a huge reduction in rough sleeping in his constituency, which I am sure he will praise.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con) [V]: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the success of the Everyone In programme, which has taken 37,000 people off the streets. I also congratulate him on making sure that all public services honour their legal obligations under my Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 to ensure that homelessness is prevented. He will know that every single case of homelessness and rough sleeping is an individual case that has to be assessed. Will he therefore commit to a national roll-out of Housing First so that the network of support is built around those people who have been forced to sleep rough, not just with a home, but with the support they need?

Robert Jenrick: I praise my hon. Friend for the work that he has done. It is important that we do not attribute the whole of the success that we are seeing this year to the Everyone In initiative. As I said earlier, its roots lie much deeper than that, in the work that has been done over the last couple of years. His Homelessness Reduction Act played an important part in that. The statistics that we have published today show that the average person sleeping rough is a 26-year-old male, exactly the sort of individual that the Act set out to ensure was given support and that might not have been supported previously by local authorities. My hon. Friend is also right to praise Housing First. The pilots continue with £28 million of Government support, and the £430 million that we are investing in move-on accommodation is very much in the spirit of Housing First that we need to get individuals into a home and then give them wraparound care.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD) [V]: The Secretary of State promised that no one would lose their home due to the pandemic. The moratorium on evictions has helped to keep people off the streets, but it covers only those people with rental debt up to six months, and of course the pandemic has been going on now for something like 12 months. There are 1,500 people in South Lakeland who are both private renters and members of workforce groups that have been excluded from Government support, with no income to pay the rent. How will he keep his promise to them?

Robert Jenrick: I am proud of the action that we have taken to support renters throughout the pandemic. The hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to the moratorium on evictions that I introduced early on with my right hon. and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor. We have chosen to extend that on at least one more occasion to the end of March. That enables people to be safe and secure in the knowledge that they will not be forced out of their homes. There are exceptions to it, but they are the right exceptions. There are exceptions for domestic abuse perpetrators, for those who have committed serious antisocial behaviour which is damaging the lives of their neighbours, and for those who are in egregious rent arrears of six months or more. We have to strike a balance between the interests of the tenant and those of smaller landlords, some of whom are in

very difficult circumstances. We have also created a six-month notice period for evictions, which means that people have a very long period to adjust to changing circumstances.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I declare my interest as a member of Kettering Borough Council. Rough sleeping is the most extreme form of homelessness, and the Secretary of State is quite right to prioritise tackling it. The really good news from north Northamptonshire is that the number of recorded rough sleepers has fallen from 62 in 2018 to 22 on the latest count, and in Kettering the number has fallen from 17 to one. Will the Secretary of State join me in praising John Conway and the housing team at Kettering Borough Council for the tremendous work they are doing to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping?

Robert Jenrick: I would be delighted to extend my praise to John Conway and his officers at the council. The statistics that my hon. Friend has just read out are a real tribute to the hard work that they have put in over the course of the year, in very difficult circumstances during the pandemic. To see Kettering Borough Council having a count of only one individual sleeping rough is an enormous tribute to what they have achieved.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab) [V]: The Secretary of State was right to praise councils for their role. Here in Chesterfield, we have seen a big reduction in the amount of rough sleeping during the pandemic as the council has utilised the money provided by Government well. I agree with many of the issues that he raised about the causes of rough sleeping and homelessness, but I was alarmed that the role of welfare policy was missing from that list. I am concerned that in Chesterfield many of the rough sleepers I have spoken to tell me that, while they are aware that council flats are available for them, the amount of benefit they receive means that the rent would be unaffordable and they would end up being evicted again. I fear that once the eviction ban ends, we will see a big increase in the number of rough sleepers again. Can the Secretary of State say a little about the role of welfare policy and whether, by looking at issues such as the bedroom tax and the levels of rent being paid, we can take steps to ensure that this welcome progress is not lost when the eviction ban is ended?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. We must have brief questions if I am to get everybody in, because we have two big debates and a Select Committee statement after this. So, brief questions and fairly succinct answers please.

Robert Jenrick: I shall be brief, Madam Deputy Speaker. The hon. Gentleman is right to raise some of the other causes of homelessness and rough sleeping. That is why we increased the local housing allowance to the 30th percentile, and why my right hon. Friend the Chancellor uplifted universal credit during the height of the pandemic, and of course we brought forward the furlough scheme and others to support vulnerable people over the course of the year.

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con) [V]: Carshalton and Wallington is proud to be the home of the amazing local charity Sutton Night Watch, which brings together multiple local agencies, not just to put a

roof over people's heads but to provide them with support for addiction, benefits, job hunting, mental health and much more. I have seen it completely transform people's lives. The Government have done amazing work to support charities and councils with help for rough sleeping, so can my right hon. Friend outline how we are going to build on that support to help charities such as Sutton Night Watch to bring this to an end?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend represents one of the parts of the country where the snapshot showed that only a single individual was sleeping rough on that night in November, so I pay huge tribute to everybody involved in that in Carshalton and Wallington. Like him, I praise the Sutton Night Watch charity. We will be supporting charities and local councils over the course of next year, not least with £750 million of Government funding.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab) [V]: I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as a sitting Luton councillor. We heard earlier that almost 130,000 children were homeless and living in temporary accommodation before the pandemic, and that is almost double what it was a decade ago. Very urban councils such as Luton have no space left to build on, and the so-called duty to co-operate policy has failed to ensure that housing demand is met by neighbouring councils. What does the Secretary of State propose to do to tackle this issue and help councils such as Luton to ensure that good-quality, genuinely affordable social houses can be built for homeless families, which will maintain their community ties?

Robert Jenrick: Luton Borough Council's area has seen a 65% reduction in rough sleeping, according to the numbers that were published today, so I hope that the hon. Lady will welcome the considerable steps forward by her local council and community. She is right to raise the need to build more social and affordable housing. That is why we have the £11.5 billion affordable homes programme, which I hope that the council and housing associations in her vicinity will participate in. I do not accept that Luton cannot build more homes. There are plenty of imaginative ways in which a community such as Luton could be building more, through urban regeneration, through building upwards and through gentle density.

Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con): Over the past 20 months we have had a reduction of 49% in the number of rough sleepers in Milton Keynes. That is incredibly welcome and it is down to the hard work of the Everyone In programme, and the millions of pounds of Government funding allocated to the local authority and local charities, but most important—I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will agree—it is down to the team effort of charities such as The Bus Shelter MK, the Winter Night Shelter Milton Keynes, the YMCA, the Salvation Army and the national charities such as Shelter and Crisis.

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend is right. This is a collective effort across the whole country and in every community. I join him in praising everyone in Milton Keynes for their hard work. To have achieved almost a 50% reduction in rough sleeping over the year is a huge achievement.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab) [V]: Official statistics estimate that 4,266 people were sleeping rough at the start of the pandemic, but the Government claim to have helped 33,000 rough sleepers into emergency accommodation. How does the Secretary of State square that circle, and will he commit to providing a richer and more frequent picture of homelessness and rough sleeping across the country to ensure that everyone's basic human rights with regard to shelter can be met both as we come through the pandemic and in the longer term?

Robert Jenrick: The numbers that we publish today are a snapshot of a single night in November. Those are the most robust data sources that we have. They are the ones that we are able to measure ourselves on because they have been in place for more than 10 years now. I think that that is the right way forward.

The Everyone In programme did not help just those individuals who were actually sleeping rough on the streets. It also helped many people who were sofa surfing or in other forms of precarious accommodation and who were at risk of ending up on the streets. So the success of the programme has been not just to get people off the streets, but to help many thousands of other people who were otherwise in difficult circumstances to begin to move forward with their lives.

Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con [V]): I was pleased once again to support my local charity Guildford Action and raise funds to help train volunteers on how to use the life-saving drug naloxone by sleeping out at the end of November last year. The Government, working with local authorities and charities, have supported a huge number of rough sleepers during the last year and kept the vulnerable safe during the pandemic. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that those individuals are still able to access services such as drug and alcohol rehabilitation so that they can recover and get back on their feet?

Robert Jenrick: Yes, they certainly are. In each of the interventions that we have made over the course of the pandemic and will make in the future, we have taken this housing and health approach, in which we try to ensure that individuals are not merely brought off the streets and helped to live in better-quality accommodation but given wraparound care so that we can begin to address substance misuse, mental health and other issues and reintegrate them into society. That is very much the strategy that I, and my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary, will be taking forward.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab) [V]: I welcome these figures as they stand, although I worry that they have been precipitated only by the pandemic crisis and we could have had this action at any time in the past 10 years. I agree with the Secretary of State that we have to bring together mental health services, drug and alcohol addiction services and local authorities, all of which have had their budgets slashed in the past decade. What certainty can the right hon. Gentleman give those bodies that beyond the current funding period there will be a long-term funding process on which they can rely to take this programme forward?

Robert Jenrick: The Health Secretary and I secured funding at the spending review for the programme of support for mental health conditions and substance abuse.

[Robert Jenrick]

We also made a joint bid with the Minister of Justice to help people who are currently in prison to receive offers of accommodation when they leave jail. More than 50% of those people sleeping rough on our streets are ex-offenders, and that is a very important angle that we need to address.

I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's remarks about the success of the programmes that we have run over the course of the year. I praise Chester because I see that its numbers have reduced from 14 last year to just four in November's count.

Ruth Edwards (Rushcliffe) (Con) [V]: It is great news that the Everyone In programme and the hard work of my right hon. Friend, councils and charities across the country helped to prevent 21,000 extremely vulnerable people from becoming infected with coronavirus this year. Can he confirm that the £10 million announced last March by the Government to support councils and their ongoing efforts to prevent rough sleeping can be used to ensure that people who are sleeping rough or at risk of sleeping rough can access a covid vaccine in line with the priority groups outlined by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation?

Robert Jenrick: Yes, I can. It was very important to us that those sleeping rough were not left out of the vaccination programme, by oversight or omission, so we launched the Protect Plus programme to provide extra support to local councils so that they can work with the NHS, weave those individuals into the local vaccination programmes or get them GP-registered, which is a good in itself. That will ensure that when their time comes, they are vaccinated so that even if they return to the streets, which of course we hope they do not, they do so protected by the vaccination.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab) [V]: During the recent cold spell, it was heartbreaking to see rough sleepers in the heart of Newcastle in the snow. Newcastle City Council has a bed for every rough sleeper, but hostel accommodation is not suitable for everyone. Does the Secretary of State agree that annual short-term programmes, however successful, will not end rough sleeping, and will he provide the long-term funding needed to support real change at a local level, as well as greater access to social housing?

Robert Jenrick: I pay tribute to Newcastle City Council, which has made great progress over the course of the year. Its snapshot shows that the numbers have almost halved compared with the previous year. The hon. Lady is right that we need a long-term strategy. That is why we have the rough sleeping initiative, which is now in its third year, and we are really starting to see the fruits of that work. I want to see that continue for many years. That is also why we have created the multi-year Move On accommodation programme, backed by £400 million, and of course I hope that there is a multi-year settlement across Government later this year and that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor will be able to continue that level of investment well into the future.

Matt Vickers (Stockton South) (Con): Brian and Stella Jones are two of the most incredible, compassionate, inspiring people you will ever meet. They set up the

Moses Project in Stockton, which helps people who find themselves homeless as a result of addiction. Every day they are saving lives and giving people another chance. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the charity sector has a massive role to play in helping us to tackle rough sleeping once and for all?

Robert Jenrick: Charities across the country, including in Stockton, should be proud of the work they have done in that respect. This could have been one of the most challenging and difficult issues facing the country. In fact, as a result of their work and that of local councils—I would like to think that the Government played a significant part as well—we have a very different story to tell today. We have protected some of the most vulnerable people in society and we have something that is now looked upon across the world as a great achievement.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab) [V]: Councils have duties to the homeless but are underfunded by £2 billion by this Government. Hull City Council, which did an amazing job with rough sleepers during the pandemic, is today setting its council tax. Like many other councils, it will be forced to ask the just managing working families to pay more tax to fund these essential council services. Is this not again a case of going back to the days of the poor keeping the poor, because of deliberate political decisions taken by Government since 2010?

Robert Jenrick: I do not like to disagree with the right hon. Lady, because she is right on many issues, but she is wrong on this one, I am afraid. Local councils have self-reported to my Department that they have spent around £1 billion less on covid-19 issues than we have given them, so we have overfunded councils at the moment. We will do everything we can to make good our promise to support them through the pandemic. We have increased the amount of funding for homelessness and rough sleeping, as I said earlier, by 60% year on year to £750 million.

I do not think that this issue is one of money today; it is about commitment, and it is about delivery. The right hon. Lady's local council in Hull is actually one of the small number of local authorities that have seen an increase in rough sleepers, from six in the last count to 19 in this one, compared with the many good examples in the other direction that I have been able to report today on a cross-party basis. I think that further effort between my Department and her local council, perhaps with her support, is needed in the months ahead.

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): Last autumn, I very much welcomed the Government's allocation of more than £1.4 million to Bradford Council for local schemes that provide accommodation for people at risk of sleeping on our streets. It is great to hear that further funding is on its way. Of course, wraparound care to tackle issues to do with drug addiction and alcohol addiction, as well as health and wellbeing issues, is incredibly important. Therefore, would the Secretary of State commend the work done by Project 6 and Homeless Not Hopeless in my constituency, which are also working across the Bradford district?

Robert Jenrick: I am happy to praise those local organisations for the good work they have done, and I join my hon. Friend in praising Bradford Council for its

good work. It has seen an almost 60% reduction in the number of people sleeping rough in its area over the course of a year.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab) [V]: Far too many homeless people end up in poor-quality supported housing where they do not actually get any of the support they need to help them to deal with the underlying issues, and too often they end up back on the streets as a result. Can the Minister give an update on what is happening with the supported housing pilots? When will he be able to bring in regulation or better oversight of the sector, so that we do not see homeless people ending up in that situation?

Robert Jenrick: The hon. Lady raises an important point. She has worked on that with the Minister for Regional Growth and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Thornbury and Yate (Luke Hall), who is a parliamentary near neighbour of hers, in the Bristol area. We have taken forward research to see whether tighter regulation of supported housing is required, and we recently decided to extend those pilots and provide further funding for them, so that we can learn more before coming to a judgment as to whether we need to put in place legislative or other measures to protect people from poor-quality outcomes. I would be happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss that further, if she would benefit from that.

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con) [V]: I declare an interest, in that I remain a Westminster City councillor. I pay tribute to Westminster City Council for a 27% decrease in the number of rough sleepers on the streets of our capital today. Obviously we have more work to do, and part of the issue is the legislation that we are dealing with. The Vagrancy Act is 200 years out of date, and I am campaigning with Crisis, The Passage and St Mungo's for repeal of the Act and to introduce legislation that will respond to the 21st-century reasons why people are still on the streets. Will my right hon. Friend agree to meet me and those organisations, to discuss how we can work together to repeal that legislation?

Robert Jenrick: I join my hon. Friend in praising Westminster City Council, its officers, its brilliant leader Rachael Robathan, and its very good previous leader,

both of whom have been extremely committed to that issue. I have spoken to my hon. Friend and to Rachael Robathan almost weekly about it and, as my hon. Friend says, Westminster has now experienced a 27% decrease in rough sleeping, which is a phenomenal achievement for all involved. I look forward to working with her and Rachael Robathan in the future.

We have reviewed the Vagrancy Act and will be saying more in the weeks ahead. I would be very happy to meet my hon. Friend. It is my opinion that the Vagrancy Act should be repealed. It is an antiquated piece of legislation whose time has been and gone. We should consider carefully whether better, more modern legislation could be introduced to preserve some aspects of it, but the Act itself, I think, should be consigned to history.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab) [V]: I congratulate the Secretary of State but, further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), in Birmingham it has just been announced that Prospect Housing's exempt accommodation is to close, following serious safeguarding issues. What will the Secretary of State do to ensure that it is not out of the frying pan into the fire for those 1,600 vulnerable people, and that they do not end up on the streets?

Robert Jenrick: I will look into the case that the hon. Gentleman raises. I have seen concerning evidence about some providers of supported housing. That is why we are doing the work at the moment to see what the true situation is, whether a tighter regulatory environment is required, and, if so, how we deliver that. I would be happy to take his advice as to how we move forward. I take the opportunity to praise his council in Birmingham for its hard work. Birmingham is one of the shining examples of success over the course of the last year, and its rough sleeping count, announced today, of just 17 individuals for a large city—England's largest local authority—is a huge achievement.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. I am suspending the House for two minutes to allow for the necessary arrangements to be made for the next business.

1.20 pm

Sitting suspended.

Growing Back Better Report

ENVIRONMENTAL AUDIT COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): We now come to the Select Committee statement. Philip Dunne, who is participating virtually, will speak on his subject for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, I will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement and call Philip Dunne to respond to those in turn.

Front Benchers may participate in questioning. Questions and answers should be succinct—I really want to emphasise that there should not be long commentaries on the statement, but questions to Philip Dunne, Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee.

1.22 pm

Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con) [V]: First, I thank the Chair and members of the Backbench Business Committee for granting me the opportunity to make this statement three sitting days before the Chancellor of the Exchequer rises to make his own statement to the House on his 2021 Budget. I am also grateful to the Exchequer Secretary for alerting me to the reason why she is not on the Treasury Bench; I know she is watching proceedings virtually, and I am grateful for her message earlier.

I would also briefly like to thank my colleagues on the Environmental Audit Committee, both past and present, who have been involved in this inquiry, which led to the report that I introduce today. From very early on in our work last year, it became abundantly clear that in creating policies to revive the economy after the devastating impact of the covid pandemic, the Government must take every opportunity to grow back greener—the name of our report. We have a golden opportunity to do so, with the Prime Minister genuinely committed to giving global leadership to this issue this year, as he will be hosting the G7 in Cornwall in four months' time as well as the largest international conference ever hosted in this country, under the auspices of the United Nations conference on climate change in Glasgow, in nine months' time.

In November last year, the Government intensified their ambition to meet their targets and obligations under the UN convention and the Paris agreement by increasing their commitments in publishing the nationally determined contribution for the UK, setting an example to the other countries that will be coming to the UK this year by confirming a 68% targeted reduction in 1990-level emissions by 2030—a key milestone on the path to net zero Britain by 2050. When the world congregates here, whether physically or virtually, for COP26, we want the UK to have a demonstrably powerful case of action, not just words, to inspire the rest of the world as to how a major industrialised economy can meet the challenge of climate adaptation.

It is therefore particularly critical that we do not miss the other clear opportunity that presents itself as the Chancellor decides next week which further exceptional fiscal and monetary levers to pull to revive the economy from its greatest contraction in over three centuries. I

can put it no more simply than this: we must not repeat the mistakes of the past as we start to recover from covid. We must ensure that the measures we take will also materially help the goal of net zero Britain.

We have much to commend in how the Government have gone about the recovery to date. The Prime Minister's 10-point plan for a green industrial revolution is a vital step towards the Government's twin objectives of economic recovery and climate change adaptation. Similarly, the Chancellor's national infrastructure strategy was accompanied by a revision of Green Book guidance so that investment decisions properly account for overarching Government net zero policy objectives.

These high-level strategies are now being backed up by further key staging posts, such as the energy White Paper, but the pause in progress on delivering Government policy caused by the covid crisis over the past 12 months must be overcome as the detailed plans and policies so vital to delivering on these objectives must be brought forward and implemented at pace and scale. Our Committee keeps receiving confirmation that the private sector is standing by with a wall of money to invest in projects that make a genuine contribution to the economic recovery and to net zero, and they need the demand signals and policy structures in place from the Government to do so.

One policy for recovery that was brought out as an eye-catching measure when first announced as part of the summer economic package last year, which we applauded as showing a strong and positive direction of travel, is now, I regret to say, threatening to catch the eye for all the wrong reasons. Unless it is urgently overhauled, the green homes grant, with its ambitious target of retrofitting energy efficiency measures for up to 600,000 homes, risks giving this vital Government support a bad name.

Installers are quoting for work, but instead of taking on more staff and investing in training them to generate the green jobs of the future, they are actually having to lay off staff because homeowners are experiencing such unacceptable delays in having their planned work approved or voucher approvals paid. In many areas of the country, there are many homeowners who want to take up the Government's offer of help with energy efficiency measures, but cannot find accredited installers willing to quote.

Even though funding for this scheme was extended until March 2022, which is welcome, it still seems mired in administrative delay, and now we read press reports that it might be ended entirely. This would be a grave error. There are 19 million homes that need energy efficiency measures to help to reduce the 17% of carbon emissions emanating from our homes. This has to be tackled with support from Government. The scheme needs to be overhauled and extended, not scrapped.

This Chancellor, in his Budget next week, will be the first who has absolute freedom to propose changes to the rates of value added tax, or to remove certain goods and services from VAT altogether, following Brexit. What better opportunity is there to use this new flexibility than to reduce rates of VAT on repair services and reused or recycled materials, and to encourage low-carbon technologies and energy efficiency improvements to our homes by cutting the VAT payable on green home upgrades? My hon. and right hon. Friends in the Treasury and their officials will shake their heads and tell me that any revenue forgone from such measures will have to be

found from somewhere else. Well, quite, and increases in taxation are bound to be less popular than reductions, but what a powerful means of addressing our throwaway culture and demonstrating that the Government genuinely back repair, reuse and recycling of goods. Is it not the case that such an investment in a circular economy would pay massive dividends in the long run?

Lastly, I would like to highlight our recommendations on the Bank of England's response to the economic crisis. I start by thanking the Governor of the Bank and his officials for the constructive approach that they have taken to our work, and by recognising the Bank's excellent record in highlighting the financial risks from climate change above all other central banks. It was the first central bank to publish its own climate-related financial disclosure.

However, we regard the Bank as having missed a trick when introducing its financial support package for firms making a material contribution to the UK economy last year. In our view, the Bank's purchase of commercial paper in those corporate businesses ought to have required more stringent sustainability conditions, as happened in other countries. In particular, the publication of climate-related financial disclosures should have been a requirement, in line with the Government's green finance strategy.

The Governor of the Bank of England has rightly sought a little more clarity from the Government in the mandate that they set for the Monetary Policy Committee in its conduct of UK monetary policy. Our Committee has recommended that the Chancellor should make explicit that the Monetary Policy Committee should have regard in its work to the Government's climate objectives, which it already does, but also to their nature objectives. That single, simple step would also assist the Bank in adjusting its corporate bond purchasing policy to support those objectives better in the future, to lead the way in reducing the carbon intensity of the UK corporate sector overall.

Our present challenges in the midst of this pandemic are being addressed by the ingenuity of scientists, the skill of the vaccine taskforce and the heroic efforts of the NHS and all its volunteers in organising the vaccine roll-out at such pace, but I am sorry to say—that there is no vaccine that is proof against runaway climate change. It is a challenge that requires all our effort and ingenuity, and changes in behaviour, to address.

The Government, in their response to the crisis, have shown encouraging signs of promoting a green recovery. Our report points out that there is much more to be done to sustain the recovery in a way that sees the UK set genuinely on a track to net zero. I commend the report to the House.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab) [V]: I thank the Chair of the Committee not only for the way that he presented the report but for chairing the Committee with such patience, tact and, often, humour.

Covid has caused unprecedented hardship, physical, mental and economic. The Government's own figures suggest an 11% contraction of our economy this year and a loss of 1.5 million jobs from the high street. That comes just as the economy is embarking on a profound transition away from transport and heating infrastructures

based on fossil fuels, which will see even more jobs lost in those old industries, with unemployment forecast to rise to 2.6 million this year.

The report makes clear that not only is retrofitting and upgrading the 29 million UK homes essential to meet our 68% emissions reduction target by 2030, but it would be a huge creator of new jobs. Does the Chair agree, then, that the Government should bring forward much greater investment in energy efficiency programmes and resolve the serious delivery problems around the green homes grant?

Philip Dunne: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who is a valiant supporter on the Committee, for his comments about our report and the way the Committee operates. He is absolutely right. This measure, when introduced last year, was a really positive signal that, of the Government's manifesto commitment of more than £9 billion to invest in energy-efficiency improvements to buildings, £1.5 billion was to go towards owner-occupiers and the private rented sector, whereas the rest is likely to go to social housing and other types of public building.

However, the scheme has been suffering from very low take-up because of the extraordinary administrative burden that was imposed on accessing it; the lack of qualified tradesmen to undertake the work, because they have to go through a particular certification process that few companies have been prepared to secure; and the challenge of the duration of the scheme. It is difficult to persuade contractors to take on staff to do the work or even to quote for the work if the scheme is coming to an end in a short period. It was initially a six-month scheme. Thankfully, it was extended to an 18-month scheme, running out only 13 months from now, but that is not enough. We think that this scheme should endure for the whole Parliament, and it should be supported and improved by the Government. We hear from newspaper reports that there is a risk of its being scrapped. That would be a retrograde step, particularly at a time when we have the eyes of the world on us for the schemes we are introducing to address some of the carbon emission challenges and the targets we have set.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I remind Members that we must have short questions and answers, because we have two very well-subscribed debates this afternoon, and we only have 20 minutes put aside for this session, which means we have about five minutes left.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con) [V] I will do my best, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Committee's report highlights the evidence from the Bank of England that we will need a carbon tax of about \$100 per tonne by 2030 for a smooth transition of the economy to net zero. If we want to prevent large-scale offshoring of our industry and support the growth of low-carbon manufacturing here in the UK, we will need a scheme of carbon border adjustment. The EU and the USA are already working on this policy, which is both a good and a bad thing. Does my right hon. Friend agree that our presidencies of both the G7 and COP26 are an unmissable opportunity to lead an international approach to carbon border adjustment, rather than risking the imposition of piecemeal protectionist carbon barriers by individual trading blocs, with us on the outside?

Philip Dunne: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There is no question but that unilateral introduction of such a scheme has the potential to be more damaging than an international agreement. Our report recommended that the Treasury consider the issues of carbon pricing and carbon border adjustment, and I very much hope that it will take that recommendation forward.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab) [V]: I congratulate the right hon. Member and his Committee on this report. I see that it calls for new road projects to be explicitly appraised against air quality, biodiversity and climate change commitments, which I very much welcome. It has now been reported that the Transport Secretary overruled advice from his own civil servants on the need to conduct an environmental review of the planned expansion of England's road networks. Does the Committee intend to follow up its report by raising that with the Secretary of State? Does he see a future role for the Committee in scrutinising the environmental impact of the road expansion policy if the Transport Secretary is unwilling to do so?

Philip Dunne: I thank the hon. Lady for reading the report with her customary diligence to find those references. She was a very valuable member of the Committee for many years. The Committee will have to wait to see the Government's response to our report. We will be looking for responses to all our recommendations, including those on transport, and we will then decide how to respond and how that will inform our further work, but her point is well made.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con) [V]: I thank my right hon. Friend for this report, which highlights the importance of maintaining our net zero target while focusing on our economic recovery. What steps does the report highlight to improve the shortcomings found in the green homes grant?

Philip Dunne: This is the specific measure that the Government introduced with a view to achieving their objectives of stimulating the economy, meeting net zero obligations and generating jobs. At present, the scheme is disappointing in every respect. It requires a thorough overhaul of its administration, working closely with the industry and contractors to improve its implementation and providing more certainty by extending its duration.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD) [V]: Given the report's focus on the need to address our ecological crisis without delay, does the right hon. Gentleman agree that we need a strategy to devolve nature and that this is best done by devolving resources and power to local authorities?

Philip Dunne: The hon. Lady is pre-empting our next inquiry into biodiversity and ecosystems. We will have a great deal to say in that report on how nature protection and conservation are focused on at both a national and a local level. I look forward to her observations on that in the coming weeks and months.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): As co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on carbon capture, utilisation and storage, and chair of the APPG on hydrogen, I thank my right hon. Friend for his Committee's report, specifically recommendations 20 and 21, which mention

the urgent need for a hydrogen strategy. I completely agree, and I would be grateful if he elaborated on what policies he would like to see in the hydrogen strategy.

Philip Dunne: I applaud the groundbreaking work that my hon. Friend is bringing to the House in relation to hydrogen through his leadership of the all-party parliamentary group, which is doing great work in raising awareness and suggesting solutions. I rather bow to his superior knowledge on this issue. I think the key thing for industry is to understand what the Government's hydrogen strategy is, so getting it published will provide industry with a structure around which it can invest. There have been some encouraging signals in the 10-point green industrial revolution plan, but at the moment these seem to be modest steps and we need a full strategy to be published as soon as possible.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green) [V]: I thank the Chair of our Committee and agree with all that he has said. Does he agree that there is real urgency for the carbon intensity of the Bank of England's corporate bond portfolio to be cut and aligned with the Paris agreement? Analysis by the Bank itself shows that the portfolio is in step with a catastrophic 3.5° temperature rise, and this is clearly untenable, particularly if the UK aspires to be a credible host of COP26. He has spoken about the failure of the green homes grant. Does he agree that a failure to establish a revised scheme on a multi-year basis would do enormous damage both to businesses and consumers by destroying confidence and trust in any future home retrofit project? I have businesses in my constituency that face going bust because of the incompetence of this scheme.

Philip Dunne: I thank the hon. Lady for her contribution to our Committee and her characteristically robust portrayal of some of our recommendations. I touched on the Bank of England in my remarks. The pace at which it seeks to adjust its portfolio is a matter for the Bank, but it has agreed to look at this in the response from the Governor, and that is a very good start. The Bank of England has led the way internationally in many of its approaches towards climate change, and COP26 provides it with an opportunity to do more. In relation to the green homes grant scheme, I completely agree that it must be turned into a multi-year scheme to give confidence to installers up and down the country.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The Opposition very much welcome this report, with its sense of urgency and calls for action; we just wish the Government would match that. I agree with the comments on the green homes grant. I am delighted that the Committee recommends a national nature service pilot, which Labour has been calling for. We have also been calling for the Government to bring forward £30 billion in planned capital investment as part of a rapid stimulus package to support up to 400,000 new clean jobs in manufacturing and other key sectors. Does the Committee Chair agree that that is the scale of ambition that we will need if we are to see nature at the centre of a green recovery?

Philip Dunne: I am grateful for the welcome that the hon. Gentleman has just given. I am delighted to hear that those on the Labour Front Bench are keen on a national nature service. It was first recommended in a

report that we did as a Committee two or three years ago, so I am glad that all parts of the House are catching up with our Committee in its recommendations. On the scale of the measures that are required, our Committee did not seek to quantify them, but we absolutely recognise that this is a multi-year, multibillion-pound effort required in order to achieve the net zero ambition. It will reach across all elements of society and the economy; minor measures will not move the dial.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con) [V]: I strongly support the green VAT cuts. Did the Committee examine the future of the petrol and diesel car industry, and especially the future of the diesel engine parts, with all the skilled staff and big assets, if the Government move to an early ban on these new vehicles?

Philip Dunne: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his question. The Committee is taking an interest in the impact of a transition from the current economy, with its carbon-intensive sectors, to a net zero economy. We are looking at our future programme and some of the impacts of green jobs, which we are in the middle of an inquiry on now, and we will be addressing specifically the point that he makes about the impact on the motor sector. In respect of the future, we are interested in some of the impacts of moving from an internal combustion engine source of transport to electrified transport and what that might do across different transport sectors. We will be working with the Transport Committee to ensure that we do not duplicate efforts, but that we are able to look into those matters.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Chair of the Committee for his report and for answering Members' questions.

Points of Order

1.46 pm

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab) [V]: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Yesterday, I asked a question at Prime Minister's Question Time. My question was:

Is the 40% cut to Transport for the North's budget part of the Prime Minister's plans for levelling up the north?

The Prime Minister replied:

"There has been no such cut, and we intend to invest massively in Northern Powerhouse Rail, and in railways in the north and across the entire country."—[*Official Report*, 24 February 2021; Vol. 689, c. 911.]

I raise this point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker, as I believe that the Prime Minister has misled the House by saying this. The papers for the Transport for the North board meeting in January 2021 set out the cut. Iain Craven, finance director at Transport for the North, has said:

"Transport for the North has clearly indicated its disappointment and concern that, at a time when the Government's levelling up agenda is needed most, funding is being cut, putting northern investment and jobs at risk."

There has been further extensive media coverage of the Government's decision to cut 40% of the core central funding for Transport for the North in the *Rail Technology Magazine*, the *Yorkshire Post*, and on ITV and the BBC. Mayor Burnham has spoken about this cut, too. Madam Deputy Speaker, I seek your guidance as to what can be done to correct the record on an issue that many people in the north care deeply about.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am very grateful to the right hon. Member for giving me notice of her intention to raise this matter. I am sure she will confirm that what she was saying was that the Prime Minister unintentionally misled the House.

Dame Diana Johnson *indicated assent.*

Madam Deputy Speaker: She is nodding. As she knows, I am not responsible for the accuracy or otherwise of what is said by Ministers from the Dispatch Box, but she has made her concerns known very clearly to the House, and I am sure that she will also find other ways to pursue this matter, and those on the Treasury Bench will have heard what she said.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. In the light of the report on the Northern Ireland protocol carried out by the European Research Group, a group of influential Members of this House, and further to the Joint Committee meeting that was held yesterday that brought no resolution, may I ask whether you have received any notification that the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland or the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster will make an urgent statement to this House to address the failure of the Northern Ireland protocol, including the economic and community disasters and problems that have followed and the crippling effect on businesses? It is time for the United Kingdom Government to action article 16 and scrap the Northern Ireland protocol.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon Gentleman for giving me notice of his point of order. I am not aware of any request by the Government to make a statement

[Madam Deputy Speaker]

on the important issue raised by him, but I am sure that those on the Government Benches will have heard his request.

Backbench Business

Education Route Map: Covid-19

1.50 pm

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con) [V]: I beg to move,

That this House has considered the proposal for a national education route map for schools and colleges in response to the covid-19 outbreak.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for giving me this debate, and pay real tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) and the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson), who have been relentless campaigners for getting our children learning again and who went with me to the Backbench Business Committee. I wish to pay tribute to all the teachers and support staff in my constituency, many of whom have worked day and night to keep children learning, in early years provider schools and in our excellent Harlow College.

Why is this debate so important today? It is because this past year has been nothing short of a national disaster for our children and young people. The—
[Inaudible.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. There is a problem; I have to stop the right hon. Gentleman, as we have a technical hitch. It must be a serious one, because Mr Halfon clearly cannot hear me and cannot see that I am standing up. I hope that something is being done behind the scenes to try to get through to him. I think we must have a two-way problem, as we cannot hear him and he cannot hear me. As he is introducing the debate, this does give us a little difficulty, so I am taking the decision to suspend the House for three minutes until we can sort out the technical problem.

1.52 pm

Sitting suspended.

1.55 pm

On resuming—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. It seems that the technical difficulty has been overcome. I will just check with the right hon. Member for Harlow that he can hear me.

Robert Halfon: I can hear you perfectly; thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker: And wonderfully, Mr Halfon, we can hear you. I am afraid that all but the first sentence of your speech was lost, so let us start again from the very beginning.

Robert Halfon: I thank the Backbench Business Committee for giving me this debate, and pay real tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester and the hon. Member for Twickenham, who have been relentless campaigners for getting our children learning again, and who supported me in my Backbench Business application. I pay real tribute to all—
[Inaudible.]

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I am afraid we have another problem. I am so sorry. Once again, the right hon. Member cannot hear me. I am going to stop him

immediately. Instead, I am going to ask the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), to whom the right hon. Member for Harlow has just paid tribute for his support, to open the debate—with no notice whatever.

1.56 pm

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) can at least hear this. Hopefully we can get him back to “open” the debate, after it has already been opened. We made the application to the Backbench Business Committee together, along with the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson). Of course, when we made the application, the Prime Minister’s national road map of Monday had not been announced, and we were very much pushing for a national educational route map out of covid-19 for schools and colleges, as in the title of the debate. We are, of course, all delighted that the Prime Minister made an announcement on Monday and that all schools will return, or at least be able to return, for all pupils from 8 March.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow leads the Education Committee with aplomb, and I would not try to take his place, but I know what he will want to cover in this debate, including the practicality issues around testing. He will also be majoring on issues around the catch-up fund and the announcement by the Secretary of State in his statement this morning about exams for this year’s cohort. Hopefully he will get his chance to make that pitch at some point during today’s debate.

Obviously, I greatly welcome the announcement about 8 March; I have called for this to happen many times in the House, as have so many colleagues across all Benches. As I said on Monday, it is absolutely the right decision. As a constituency MP for almost 11 years, I have never seen such concern and anxiety from parents and grandparents for the current state of mind and state of education of their children as I have seen in recent months. They are beyond worried about the impact of this dreadful pandemic on their children. That is what led me to push as hard as I did for schools to return. That is not to say that I am a “let it rip” merchant in any state of the term, whether that be in the wider economy or in schools. Of course we have to have a cautious, irreversible, balanced and data-driven release from lockdown, and we have to have—exactly—a cautious, irreversible data-driven return of our schools and colleges. I believe that that is what the Government are trying to set out.

There is no point in pretending—the Prime Minister made this very clear on Monday—that there will not be an impact on cases, on hospitalisations and even on deaths as a result of lifting restrictions on our economy. Anybody who seeks, after 8 March, to say, “Well, this is the consequence that wasn’t admitted to by the Government at the time” would be disingenuous, to put it mildly.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Steve Brine: Yes, I will briefly, but I do not want to mess with the timings from Madam Deputy Speaker.

Jim Shannon: I spoke to the Minister before coming to the House. In the past, before covid-19, we had things called summer schools. We have not had summer schools for the past year. Does the hon. Gentleman feel that one way of getting beyond this, whenever the schools go back, is to also have summer schools, and for that to happen we need the funding—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I hope that we can now proceed. These are rather difficult circumstances.

Steve Brine: Summer schools are part of the catch-up programme. The hon. Gentleman has got his point on the record.

In many ways, the announcement on Monday about the return of schools was naming a date. That was the easy part. The challenge now is how we do that in the cautious, irreversible way that I have spoken about. I have reached out and heard from many of my constituency headteachers in the past 48 hours, and I have to say that the negativity and “yes, but what about” drain from some national figures on this subject is strikingly different from talking to my constituency heads, and the practical Winchester good sense I have seen from them. Let me quote one, who said:

“There is certainly a lot of work to be done before the 8th of March, but there is a sense of positivity and relief of our pupils coming back to school”,

and that is typical of what I have heard. I have been interested to hear, as there is much talk during the debate about safety in schools, comments such as:

“I am very happy to report that we have had no covid cases in school since September”,

or,

“no confirmed adult or child covid cases since this all started almost a year ago (not tempting fate).”

That of course will not be the case everywhere. There are terrible tales and terrible examples, but I cannot but be honest and report to the House that that is what I have heard from some of my constituency heads. None of that is to say that we do not have problems—of course we do—and I will just touch on three and then let others speak.

Testing for covid is right up there for my secondaries. Whether we like it or not, the return will be staggered for many in the week of 8 March, prioritising years 10 and 11, but it is the sheer practicality of testing all students three times that is the challenge. As one school said to me, “I’m deploying as many staff as possible to testing while still allowing teaching to take place”. For big secondary schools where the majority arrive by bus, there is an obvious compounding factor that makes extended hours or weekend testing very difficult. We will get it done with that can-do attitude. When I spoke to the Secretary of State this lunchtime, he reminded me that the guidance released yesterday said that schools can test in the week leading up to 8 March, which is next week. I hope that some big secondary schools—the one that gave me that example has 1,200 pupils—will take up the offer of doing that next week.

Secondly, in terms of testing in the academic sense, Minister, can we please be brave and face the issue of statutory testing at primary levels at this time? Having now missed two years of these tests, this may be the moment to draw breath and check that they are what we want to do, and that they are there for the right reasons.

[Steve Brine]

Thirdly, on the catch-up programme, which I know we will hear more about from the Chair of the Select Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow, if and when we can get him back online, I welcome the one-off recovery premium and the fact that it is for schools to use “as they feel best”, as per the Government’s statement, but we would be wrong to rest on that. It cannot remain a one-off.

On the national tutoring programme, £300 million is a lot of money. I know that the Department for Education has said that it has been shown to boost catch-up learning by as much as three to five months at a time, but I want to be reassured—this may be one for my right hon. Friend’s Select Committee in due course—that external tutors, who do not know the pupils, their profile as learners or the individual strategies used by an individual school to ensure consistency in the approach to that learning, continue to be the best way to spend that large amount of money.

On mental health and anxiety, I think that educational catch-up in my area will be okay in the short to medium term, but the anxiety and the mental health challenge that I am hearing about, and which I referred to at the start, is structural. There is a structural weakness that is undermining it all. I have heard from so many constituents and parents who have said that, of course, they are pleased that schools are going back from 8 March, but their children are nervous about going back. They have got used to not being out in society—can I believe that I am even saying these words in the House of Commons? They are incredibly anxious about doing this, and that structural challenge will be with them long after the catch-up programmes have done, hopefully, their best. I have to say, masks for the anxious are really not helping, so I very much welcome the Government’s intention to review that after the Easter holidays.

Finally, on Monday, I mentioned organised outdoor sport—not school sport, which I know is allowed from 8 March. The fact that organised outdoor sport is not allowed at the same time does not help with getting over the anxiety and getting the endorphins that we know and I know, as a former Public Health Minister—I have spoken about this many times in this place—result from that sport.

I hope, in opening the debate, that I have framed some of the key issues and that we can now proceed without incident.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his impromptu opening of the debate. We will now have a three-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches, and I am afraid that not everyone who is on the call list will be called this afternoon.

2.6 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab) [V]: Last month, just one day after sending millions of children and staff back into schools to mix, the Prime Minister did a U-turn. He decided that it was too dangerous and that, in his words, schools were “vectors of transmission”. Einstein said that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results, but that is what the Government are doing with their

big-bang reopening of schools. Recklessly forcing 10 million school pupils and staff back in a very short time risks a spike in community transmission.

We have heard deliberately vague claims from Ministers that this is backed by the science, yet on Monday, the very day the big-bang school return was announced, the minutes of a meeting of SAGE—the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies—were published. Far from endorsing a school reopening, they recommended a phased reopening of schools. Another group of Government scientific advisers warned that full school reopening could increase the R rate by up to 60%, so once again, the Government are ignoring the advice of the scientific advisers.

The Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish Administrations are listening to that evidence and taking a phased approach. That means opening up for one group of students and carefully monitoring the impact over a few weeks. That is the way to reopen schools in a safe and sustainable way. We all want to see children back learning, but it must be done in a way that keeps infection rates down, not just in schools but in the wider community.

The Prime Minister says that opening schools is a “national priority”, but I am afraid that I do not believe for a minute that it is, because the Government care nothing for children’s welfare—not when the Government have forced over half a million more children into poverty, not when they axed the education maintenance allowance, not when they imposed £9,000 university fees, not when they closed hundreds of youth centres. A safe, phased reopening is what scientists, staff and other experts are calling for. Instead, we have a politically motivated return. It is a reckless gamble and I fear that our communities, and especially the poorer communities, where the prevalence of the virus is still highest, will pay the price.

2.9 pm

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con) [V]: The full return of schools on 8 March is much more than a waypoint on a road map. I very much welcome it and the safety measures in place. Can I congratulate my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) on how he, at no notice, opened this debate? I join him in noting the can-do attitude of local school leaders and in thanking teachers in East Hampshire, as elsewhere, for all they continue to do.

This is not just about a cohort of children; it is about our children and about the future of our country. As we rebuild for those children, obviously schools and teachers will be in the lead, but we cannot put all the responsibility on them. It is a shared national endeavour in which everyone is responsible. Of course, it is about schools, but it is not only about schools. We need to think of a plan with children. In Government terms, that takes in the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and others, but it also goes far wider. I welcome the money announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State yesterday, but it is also not all about money. Partly, it is about time, but we cannot just cram our way through this. There are limits on how much we can lengthen days. Attention spans themselves have limits, and holidays are important, too. However, there is a role for those, and there are

plenty of things that can be done outside the normal school day that are an equally important part of development and growing up.

My right hon. Friend is quite right to leave the discretion to individual schools, but there are things Government can facilitate to get everyone talking about how everyone is involved. I would like to propose a few areas. First, there will need to be more people to help with the tutoring programme. It has been hard recently finding supply teachers, let alone those for additional tutoring. There are lots of people in this country who have a postgraduate certificate in education already but are not currently teaching, and I hope the Department can work out a simplified route for those who want to be able to come back to the profession, including some refresher training.

Secondly, alongside the professionals, we need a volunteer army. A lot of course happens in schools already with volunteer readers, STEM—science, technology, engineering and maths—ambassadors, mentoring programmes and so on. We do not need to replace those things, but we need to see how we can grow them and be yet more ambitious. I would like every organisation and company in this country to have a board meeting item to discuss how they can support this great endeavour for our children. It might be giving staff time for mentoring or careers advice, but it could also, as with the Hungry Little Minds campaign, be where companies work out how they can, in their business activity, help support early literacy development.

This is about much more than classwork; it is about mental health, as my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester said. It is about activities to make children active again, working with national governing bodies and local clubs. It is not just to catch up on schoolwork, but to get children back on track to rebuild opportunity, broaden horizons and get back to enjoying childhood at the same time. It is a big task and a big ask, and one we all have a role in.

2.12 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab) [V]: I would like to pick up the point that the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) introduced about anxiety and childhood mental health. First, drawing on the work done by the excellent Professor Michael Marmot, it is clear that covid-19 has exposed deep health inequalities, and I see this every day in my constituency work. Some 80% of young people say their mental health has deteriorated during the covid crisis. Before the first lockdown, about 10% of LGBT young people reported feeling depressed every day, which rose to 25% during the first lockdown. One in five young people experiences a mental health problem dropping out of education, due to stigma, and we know that, in our alternative provision for children who cannot remain in mainstream school, there is a huge mental health burden.

Today, I want to talk briefly about the mental health problems associated with eating disorders. First, I would like to put on record my respect for the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), who has spoken very movingly about having an eating disorder as a teenager, and for the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), who leads the all-party party group on eating disorders. Obviously, the Government have done some important work in response to the Marmot review and have developed

the wellbeing for education return scheme and the mental health support teams, together with the designated senior lead and in schools and colleges.

However, Mind—and I should say that I am a patron of Mind in Haringey—and its partner YoungMinds have briefed me about the lack of awareness in schools and colleges of the wellbeing for education return scheme. I would like the Minister to tell us in her closing remarks on what will be done by the Government to develop awareness in schools and colleges of the wellbeing for education return scheme. In addition, the mental health support teams and the designated senior lead are both good innovations. What is being done to put them in place on the ground?

Next week is Eating Disorders Awareness Week. Hope Virgo, who leads the campaign for people to understand eating disorders and do something about them, has emphasised the importance of more funding for primary and secondary care, and enhanced counselling sessions, really addressing the wider mental health problems associated with eating disorders. I hope that next week all Members of Parliament can get in touch with their local services and promote locally the stopping of eating disorders.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): We will now go back to Harlow, but sadly only via audio link and with a limit of five minutes. I call the Chairman of the Education Committee, Rob Halfon.

2.15 pm

Robert Halfon [V]: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for your kindness and patience.

The four horsemen of the education apocalypse have galloped towards our children: a loss of learning, meaning that the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their better-off peers has widened considerably; dangerously fragile mental health; a new frontier of safeguarding vulnerabilities; and now, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, a predicted loss of £40,000 in lifetime earnings. Despite the efforts of teachers and support staff, the gulf between the haves and the have nots has deepened. I pay tribute to the UsforThem parent groups, which have done so much to highlight those issues.

The first step must be to establish a long-term national plan for education. Education should be part of a trinity of energy that the Government put in, along with the NHS and the economy. This week's announcement of a cash boost for catch-up, taking total spending to over £1.7 billion, is a really important building block in the road to recovery, but we need to ensure that the catch-up is directed mostly to disadvantaged pupils and disadvantaged schools, which have been disproportionately affected by closures.

We were told this week that 125,000 children are enrolled to benefit from the national tutoring programme, but more than 1.4 million children were eligible for free school meals. We need to ensure that the pupil premium really does target the disadvantaged. The funding currently applies to all pupils eligible for free school meals at any point in the last six years. The formula does not make any distinction between the disadvantaged and the long-term disadvantaged. The Government should look at reform, and consider a mechanism that helps the long-term disadvantaged—easily achieved by cross-referencing data from the Department for Work and Pensions.

[Robert Halfon]

We need to know that catch-up is working. Of course, I credit the Department for its delivery of more than 1 million laptops, Oak National Academy, the expanded national tutoring programme and much more, but catch-up cannot be just about the input; it is the output that matters. If this programme of support is to benefit children and convince the Treasury that it is value for money, it will require proper assessment of the outcomes.

During my almost weekly visits to schools in Harlow in normal times, I have been moved by how mental health issues, even before coronavirus, have become so widespread, and they have been exacerbated by the pandemic. The Government's plan to address that needs to be rocket-boostered. We need to ensure that the Department for Education gathers data on the extent of the damage of lockdown on children and young people's mental health. Special funding should guarantee a mental health counsellor in every school and college.

Tacking on a few extra weeks to the school term for catch-up could go some way to help, but what will really make a difference will be extending the school day, not by placing an additional burden on teachers and school staff but by inviting in civil society, sporting groups and community associations to provide pupils with much-needed physical activities and mental health support. There are 30,000 STEM ambassadors, for example, up and down the country—volunteers, ready and willing to be mobilised. Some 39% of academies founded before May 2010 have chosen to lengthen their school day, and in Harlow, my constituency, five schools, part of the NET Academies chain, already offer extended hours. We know that it makes a difference to possible educational attainment; children make two additional months' progress per year from extended school time.

A national long-term plan for education will require some self-reflection. Ministers should consider the make-up of the school year and the school day, the lay-out of the classroom, behaviour control and the nature of the curriculum and assessment—for instance, whether students should narrow at 16 or study a wider baccalaureate that blends technical, vocational and academic learning, as they do in many other countries.

I would like to conclude by noting that, all through this speech, I have used the language of “catch-up” and “recovery”, “left behind” and “disadvantage”, but I have spoken to parent groups such as UsforThem, and they make a powerful point that we must be careful about the words we use, so as not to stigmatise children. We should be ambitious for them, and although I started the debate with a gloomy prognosis, I believe that pessimism is a luxury that no person in education should allow themselves. If we make sure that the catch-up programme helps the most disadvantaged, and if we use this opportunity to look at education across the board, we can help get the covid generation back on that life chances ladder of opportunity.

2.20 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): I want to begin by saying a big thank you to all the senior leaders, headteachers, teachers, teaching assistants and staff and governors who have helped to ensure that schools have remained open throughout the pandemic. In assessing the suitability of the Government's education

route map out of covid, I asked local headteachers from Enfield to let me have their thoughts on the plan, and these are their three main areas of concern.

The first is the inadequacy of the funding being offered by the Government for primary and secondary schools. A sum of £6,000 per primary school for catch-up funding is paltry. Schools have had to spend significantly more than that on supply cover for teachers who have contracted covid, are shielding or are self-isolating due to the need to maintain bubbles, and on paying for additional laptops and tablets following the Government's woeful efforts to provide devices for remote learning—and all this having lost significant amounts of revenue in council school lettings. One headteacher told me that her school had not been fully reimbursed for the costs incurred during the summer to make the school safe. Headteachers have also raised concerns about the national tutoring programme, which to date has been very poor. One headteacher told me:

“I have spoken with several providers at length and they are only able to provide staff during the working the day...NTP should be offering additional support over and above what children are receiving in school...my kids need tuition before school, after school and the weekends.”

Secondly, there is the issue of special educational needs and disabilities provision. Many children with special educational needs have fared worse under the pandemic. My hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) mentioned issues around mental health. The charity Mind found that there was a 50% increase in children with diagnosable mental health conditions from 2017 to 2020. There needs to be huge investment in local authority mental health services for children. The Government also need to outline what support they will put in place for children and young people who cannot access child and adolescent mental health services but whose needs are too high for primary care. Without that commitment, children with mental health conditions and other special needs may never catch up.

Thirdly, there is the issue of safeguarding. Some school leaders and headteachers have notified me of a spike in safeguarding cases in their schools. The steep rise in domestic abuse against adults during lockdown is also affecting children. Schools will need additional funding for counselling and safeguarding support, but that is only one side of the equation, with stretched children's social services departments also in need of help to meet safeguarding demands.

All those who have played a role in keeping educational establishments open throughout the pandemic are among the unsung heroes of the covid crisis, but morale is low. One headteacher told me that a number of members of staff had contracted covid in December, and one in her 50s had died from covid. The Government's own advisers accept that opening schools fully will increase the R number, which is why I support the call for school staff to be prioritised in getting the vaccine.

In conclusion, unless more financial support is found for schools to plug the gap in their finances for SEND provision and safeguarding, the education route map may not lead to recovery but may be a slow and painful road to a dead end.

2.23 pm

Kate Griffiths (Burton) (Con) [V]: I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) for securing this important debate. Yesterday I had the

pleasure of meeting seven headteachers from primary schools across my constituency. I would like to echo comments made by colleagues by thanking teachers and school staff for their incredible efforts throughout the pandemic to provide support to their pupils both online and in person during lockdown and for the work going into ensuring that schools are prepared for the return of pupils on 8 March.

I welcome the education road map that the Government have set out this week. Getting children back to school is the absolute priority. Face-to-face teaching is vital for children's educational progress, wellbeing and wider development, but to ensure that children can return safely, catch up on missed classroom time and benefit from the huge advantages of face-to-face teaching, we must support teachers and schools and trust their expertise. I know that the heads I spoke to yesterday welcome the funding that has been promised, but may I urge the Minister to ensure that this funding is made available as soon as possible? Schools are thinking about summer provision and using outside providers such as Burton Albion football club to deliver sports clubs, as well as looking at running forest schools, which will have huge mental health benefits for children after the difficulties and isolation many have faced over the past 12 months. The recovery premium will ensure that that support is available, but speed is of the essence to allow schools to plan appropriately.

Finally, I urge the Government to consider again the issue of vaccinating teachers. I understand the recommendations made by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation regarding the risk of mortality for those working in schools, but if our priority is to return to the classroom, vaccinating school staff will ensure that schools stay open and will reduce community transmission. Our vaccination programme has been a huge success so far. With a targeted effort, all school staff could be vaccinated within a few days. Not only will that keep our teachers safe, but it will keep schools open and children in the classroom, which we know is right for them and the best thing for their future.

2.26 pm

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) on securing this debate. It has been a pleasure to work with him and the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), who stepped in so ably at short notice just now.

Nelson Mandela said:

“There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way it treats its children.”

Yet too often in this pandemic, I fear that children have been an afterthought for the Government.

I very much welcome the prioritisation earlier this week of schools in the road map, and I pay tribute to September for Schools, a nationwide campaign group, founded by my constituent Fiona Forbes, which has relentlessly sought to ensure that parents' and pupils' voices are heard on this issue. The welcome funding commitment to children's recovery is between 3% and 4% of the annual schools budget, which was already under significant strain and is now, strangely, yet further under strain. Many schools in my constituency are out of pocket from covid expenses, which are not being reimbursed by the Department, and have lost income, so there is a real danger that some of the catch-up

premium could be diverted into the funding gaps. The extremely worrying educational attainment and disadvantage gaps that have grown through this pandemic must be addressed as a priority, but they will not be tackled in one or two terms and a summer holiday. We need a long-term plan spanning several years, and it needs to be holistic, addressing children's academic and also social and emotional recovery, taking into account extracurricular activities such as art and sport.

There absolutely must be a greater focus on supporting children's and young people's mental health and wellbeing. We know there has been a significant increase in the number of children with a diagnosable mental health condition—one in six in 2020, up from one in nine in 2017. I have heard from young people in my constituency the anxiety that they are struggling with during lockdown. Despite that, the vast majority of the Government's catch-up funding is focused on academic catch-up. Only £8 million is specifically committed to wellbeing, but all the evidence suggests that children and young people will not be able to catch up academically if they are not in a good place emotionally. To maximise the value and impact of the academic catch-up plan, wellbeing support is critical, as well as accelerating the roll-out of both mental health support teams and training for the designated mental health leads in schools. I urge the Minister to look very seriously at a ring-fenced resilience fund that allows schools to provide bespoke mental health and wellbeing support packages, as appropriate to their pupils and their context.

I want to end by paying tribute to the amazing school staff in my constituency. They are delighted that children are coming back to school in a couple of weeks, but they are exhausted, stressed and burnt out. They have been juggling classroom and remote teaching, testing and implementing new guidance at short notice. A long-term plan for schools must put children at its heart, but focus on staff morale, wellbeing and development as well as pay.

2.29 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) for securing today's important debate.

I am delighted that schools are reopening a week on Monday. The importance of schools to children's mental health and wellbeing, as well as to their education, has been stressed by many hon. Members. My experience, as a consultant paediatrician working throughout the pandemic, has been that I have seen more children with psychiatric problems admitted to acute medical wards and, indeed, more children with eating disorders—something raised by the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, of which I am a member.

There are also safeguarding issues. Child protection referrals are down a third. They are often made by schools and we are likely to see a spike in those when schools return. It is right that the Government have made sure that schools are reopened first, and that we put children's wellbeing front and centre of all policy.

I should like to raise a couple of issues on the return. The first is the testing programme. Of course testing is very useful. Testing of all children will inevitably lead to some positive results; indeed, that is the reason for doing it. What provisions will the Government make

[Dr Caroline Johnson]

available for those children who will end up at home because they test positive? Of course it is important to all of us, and to all our health, that people do want to come forward to be tested, but equally, parents will not want children to miss any more education than they already have, so it is important that, before next week, before parents sign to give their consent to that testing, they are familiar with what will be available to those children who test positive.

The other issue that I should like to raise relates to sport, specifically school sport. We know that sport is important for children's mental health, for their self-esteem, and to improve sleep, physical health, social skills and team working; but we also know that it helps children to improve their academic performance—something that is important, as we try to ensure that children catch up academically. Sport achieves these things by many mechanisms, but particularly by improving concentration. Studies show that GCSE results are better for those children who do more sport.

The Government recommend currently that children do 60 minutes a day of moderate or vigorous exercise, but many—in fact, most—do not. Not all of that exercise needs to take place in school, but much of it does and schools can really contribute to that, through active travel, Bikeability, the daily mile, active school environments and increased school sport. So I ask the Minister to ensure that, as schools reopen, they do so in a holistic way that recognises the importance of sport to improving children's overall health, wellbeing and, indeed, academic performance.

2.32 pm

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab) [V]: I congratulate the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) on securing this very important debate, and pay tribute to all those teachers who have gone beyond the call of duty in our constituencies to support our children and young people. My thoughts are with those people who have lost family members who were teachers. In Tower Hamlets, sadly, we have lost two of our fantastic teachers to covid.

Our schools have maintained the utmost professionalism despite too often being let down by this Government during the pandemic—and that is in the context of schools in our country having faced hundreds of millions of pounds of cuts over the past decade. We had the exams fiasco last summer. We had the failure of Test and Trace, which meant that, when schools did return, many teachers had to be on leave to self-isolate and children in whole classrooms had to be sent home on multiple occasions, which meant that they were not able to attend schools. If Test and Trace had been effective enough, they could have done so.

We also saw schools, including in my constituency, having to make school buildings covid secure but not getting adequate funding to do so. As a result, some are short of some £50,000 to £100,000 each, and the Government are not stepping in to provide them with the funding that they need. Ministers must look at that carefully as schools reopen.

We saw an increase in food poverty, the fiasco over free school meals, and the appalling way in which our children were treated during lockdown. We also saw the

discrepancies between schools in disadvantaged areas, with poorer children facing bigger challenges and those from minority communities facing even greater challenges. Recent evidence shows that there will be a 22% gap between those from disadvantaged backgrounds and those from advantaged backgrounds in different schools if we do not do more to support schools from disadvantaged communities.

I call on Ministers to look at a phased return, so that this can be done safely, and to provide more support for children with disabilities, especially in special needs schools, and also in early years education. I also call on them to provide the 10,000 laptops that my borough is still lacking and to address the digital divide that is affecting young people in my constituency, to enable them genuinely to catch up when they return to school. I also hope Ministers will take seriously our concerns about teachers not being vaccinated—it is vital that they are. I would be grateful if they could address the question of those who have yet to be vaccinated and have underlying conditions in their families. If they are not vaccinated by 8 March, that is going to be a cause of anxiety for a lot of families.

2.36 pm

Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con) [V]: As Members have already stated, the education road map needs to be a long-term plan, because the educational impact of the pandemic will likely last for the entirety of this decade. The challenge is therefore to think long and proactively, and not to take short-term reactive decisions. This means taking a multi-annual strategic approach, not a tactical one that covers only 2021. We need to take a strategic approach that is wide in its vision. After all, we do not have an education system; we have an education ecosystem, for which a holistic approach is needed. We need an approach that prioritises outcomes, not outputs, and that recognises not just schools and colleges—although I know that is the subject of the debate today—but universities and beyond, into adult and lifelong learning, especially given the enormous potential that reskilling and upskilling can bring to a workforce that will be confronting change in this post-covid decade.

If we recognise that a long-term approach must be strategic in its values, we must also recognise that, in its implementation, we must be prepared for adverse reactions to any new policies. Today's announcements on teacher assessment for exams, for instance, is entirely understandable, but it must also take into account the reactions that the policy will have in relation to university admissions later in the year and, indeed, what it will mean for grade inflation. We must be careful that one person's solution does not become another's problem.

This brings me to the delivery of the road map. A long-term plan can be delivered, and can succeed, only if it is driven by a process that leads to specific outcomes that are set and then measured. Words simply are not enough. An ecosystem can thrive only under the protection of rules and when it is maintained by standards. This is particularly true of education, yet I believe that the framework of assessment, and therefore the outcomes and the independent standards that drive them, hang in the balance. We cannot afford to go backwards. Let us not throw away the importance of listening to evidence-based practice and the data-driven process. That will need new metrics, which will be essential.

I believe that, in the words of my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), we need to be positive and, if we do all of this, we can seize the opportunity to learn back better and to shape an opportunity from this crisis. Ultimately, if the national education recovery plan is to succeed, it must, above all, bring hope for a better future.

2.38 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab) [V]: I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) for securing this important debate. The last year has been extraordinarily challenging for everyone, and I want to put on record my thanks to all the teachers and support staff in schools across Dulwich and West Norwood for their incredible, tireless work to support young people, both in school and via remote learning.

All our brilliant local schools entered the pandemic having suffered 10 years of austerity. Government cuts meant that there had not been investment in IT infrastructure and skills. There was no resilience plan in place for a pandemic. As a consequence, schools were left scrambling to access resources and develop new ways of teaching.

The individual experiences of families and young people during the pandemic have varied enormously. Families living in already overcrowded accommodation, and those without access to laptops, tablets and broadband, have had a completely different experience from those with good IT and space for the whole family to work from home comfortably. Pre-existing poverty and inequality have been deepened and widened by the pandemic. Young people taking GCSEs, BTECs and A-levels this year have faced appalling and unnecessary anxiety and distress as a result of the Government's long delay in confirming how their qualifications would be assessed.

The scale of the problems that children and young people have faced just have not been matched by the funding provided by the Government to support them during the pandemic or to assist recovery afterwards. The same Government who refused to fund free school meals during the October half-term and specified mean, inadequate food parcels for low-income families have also decided that 43p per child is sufficient to help children and young people catch up on all they have missed over the past year.

We need a much more ambitious package of measures in the short term to support young people both to learn and to have equally urgently needed fun, relaxation and enjoyment of time with their peers for the rest of the current school year and over the summer. For the long term, we need a detailed plan to close the disadvantage gap in education and support children's mental health.

Supporting our children and young people to recover from the impact of this terrible pandemic, to catch up on their learning and social development and to fulfil their potential is an investment that the Government cannot afford not to make. It is an investment in the capacity and resilience of the next generation, the future of our economy and public services, and the fairness and equality of our society.

2.41 pm

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD) [V]: We all agree that schools should be the first to reopen, but I am really concerned about the lack of robust measures to make our schools truly safe for pupils, teachers and staff. The announcement about fully reopening schools should have been accompanied by details on rotas, smaller bubbles and vaccinations for teachers. We now know that SAGE itself preferred a phased reopening, and I have real concerns about whether schools, when they start to fully reopen, will be able to stay open safely.

However, today's debate is about a road map and our ideas for recovery, and I would like to cover five areas. First, we must acknowledge that educational and emotional recovery should go hand in hand. I was heartened to hear the Government's new education recovery commissioner, Sir Kevan Collins, say something similar in the last couple of days. The educational and the emotional recovery of our young people are two sides of the same coin.

Secondly, I would like to hear the Government commit to doing whatever it takes for as long as it takes, even if that is up to a decade, to ensure that every child has the chance to reclaim the opportunities for learning and social interaction that they have lost in the last year due to school closures. A big boost in schools funding will be a huge part of that. The summer catch-up fund must be only the start.

Thirdly, we need an urgent and bold offering to those pupils who are due to leave school this year. Liberal Democrats would like to see an optional additional year of fully-funded education, with living costs funded where needed, delivered in colleges and universities before students move on to higher education or training, or into the world of work.

Fourthly, my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) has already raised the recognition and retention of teachers and other teaching staff, but school governors here in St Albans have identified it as a major concern. Teachers are battling enormous workloads, enormous stress, testing, inspections and ever-changing guidance. They have no time off. They get no clapping. They get no recognition or rewards. The Government must address this urgently if we are to keep our experienced and committed school staff.

Fifthly, we have an opportunity to look afresh at our education system. Are exams on their own really the fairest way of assessing students? How will we use the innovation of online learning? Valuable skills have been learned very quickly. With a rapidly changing economy, we need to foster an expectation and culture of lifelong learning. That is less likely to happen if people have a bad experience at school. How can we use the recovery to support pupils to develop a real love of learning? For that, we need inspirational teachers, and for teachers to inspire, we need to trust them to teach. The current system of top-down, Westminster-knows-best prescription, inspection and sanction is never going to get the best out of anyone.

I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate, and—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Lady has exceeded her time. I call the hon. Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown).

2.44 pm

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con) [V]: I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) for securing this very important debate.

I, too, welcome the full reopening of schools, colleges and further education settings on 8 March, and the fact that the Government have prioritised education throughout this pandemic. The academic impacts of not being in a classroom for nearly a year will, of course, vary from child to child. The Government must ensure that any pupil who wishes to have catch-up education has the opportunity to access it. After all the lost classroom time, I am particularly keen to see the summer catch-up classes available in every school, and I appeal to teachers to participate fully in this programme.

The £700 million education recovery package, and the £1 billion covid catch-up fund from the Government mean that money is there for all students to receive the education and grades that they deserve. Despite the intense disruption of the past year, no child should be denied the future chances that they have worked so hard for. Measures to support children so that they receive equal opportunities are incredibly important. The £350 million national tutoring programme will help 2 million of the most disadvantaged children receive high-quality tuition. In addition, I welcome the £1.3 million provided by the Department for laptops and tablets for remote learning for some of our most disadvantaged children. This will revolutionise their learning.

Today's announcement about the arrangements for examinations will provide much-needed clarity as to what will be expected of teachers and pupils in the coming months. The teacher-led approach to awarding and determining grades seems to be the fairest system under the circumstances. Once grades are submitted by teachers, the exam boards and Ofqual must ensure that there is consistency and fairness across the country.

There have been extremely mixed reports about the quality of teaching and the hours provided in face-to-face and even virtual teaching by universities in the last year. I hope that the Government can agree that the care and understanding provided to our young people need to be extended to those struggling in higher education settings. All universities must be encouraged to provide a level of support and high-quality remote learning to their students, who have, after all, undertaken a significant financial burden in their student loans and accommodation throughout this pandemic.

I end by thanking all pupils, parents and teachers in my constituency for their incredible resilience over the last year. It has been a challenging and changeable time. With the road map announcement along with today's statements, we will have a positive and productive end to this academic year. Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to speak today.

2.47 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab) [V]: The pandemic has laid bare the inequalities across our society, but these have been exacerbated by the Government's utterly inadequate support for our schools, and I fear that the impact could be felt for generations.

After months of infuriating debates, the Government have finally been dragged to deliver 1 million devices to support remote learning—little cause for celebration, given that they arrive a whole year after schools first closed. I ask the Minister, whatever happened to the other 300,000 devices that were pledged? How does she think these children have been able to log in and learn from home? The answer is simple: they have not.

Every click has widened the attainment gap. We know that a device is inaccessible without connectivity, so with over half a million children without internet access at home, why have fewer than 68,000 routers been distributed? The reality is that the digital divide has manifested itself, giving those from the wealthiest backgrounds an advantage. Some 31% of those with the lowest incomes have been unable to spend a single penny on their child's remote learning since September, while the 29% on the highest incomes are spending more than £100. Eighty-six per cent. of private schools are using online live lessons compared to just 50% of state schools. Forty per cent. of children in middle-class homes access over five hours a day, compared to 26% in working-class households.

Minister, with schools reopening, this is no problem of the past because we know how far behind these children will have fallen. Whatever happened to levelling up? Before the pandemic, children on free school meals were leaving school approximately 18 months behind, and that gap was getting wider. The Government have failed those children throughout the lockdown and now offer a completely unambitious catch-up programme. Compared with the vast sums squandered throughout the pandemic, the new support promised to schools is paltry. I was tearing my hair out listening to the Secretary of State suggesting that £6,000 was enough for a school to employ more teachers.

Although I welcome the holiday schemes, work must be done to ensure that children who need them most actually attend. We need more than six weeks' catch-up, we need six months' catch-up after six months off school. One-to-one and small-group learning is vital. The schools catch-up programme needs the drive and the delivery of the vaccination programme, and the Secretary of State is simply incapable of doing that.

2.50 pm

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con) [V]: Let me start by welcoming the fact that we are getting children back into school. The whole debate must be about children's futures, but I just want to add a note of caution: Ministers must look at how best they can protect teachers now that teaching assessment grades are coming forward. I have already heard some anecdotes from teachers, saying that, having never had a complaint made against them, they are now getting complaints made against them as parents are looking to play the game. If parents disagree with the awards that are given, they can make an argument that there was unconscious bias on the part of the teacher. We need to ensure that teachers are protected and that a robust system is in place so that those sorts of games are not played.

Fundamentally, I am worried about the fact that our children will not get the level of education that they have had in the past. It is absolutely correct that we can assess a child only on what they have been taught, but

that does not mean that it is right to send them out into the world with good grades but with less of the curriculum than previous children have had. We need to look at the whole situation and see whether it is time for a fundamental root-and-branch change of how we educate, of what age children start, and of how we construct the school year. With that in mind, appeals against exam results this year should allow children to have the opportunity to take exams later in the year, perhaps in November, and allow universities to change their admission time to late January. In the United States, there are two forms of entry: one in September and one in January for children who have to resit their SATs. The time has come to totally reassess how we balance education. The long summer break is a relic of the harvest season. It would be far better to have four weeks in the summer and four weeks at Christmas, going back to school in the middle of January. That would allow the school calendar to fall in line with the calendar year, which would be a change for universities.

Fundamentally, what worries me is that we seem to be focused on staying within the constraints that have always been there, such as not making children resit the year. If all children resit the year, we could change this situation of a limited amount of education into what effectively would be extra education. Overall, with fewer than the majority of children going to university, I am worried that we are sending them out into the world without the level of knowledge that they need. The time has come to look at the situation that we face and say, "There will never be a better time for radical change." That radical change must happen because, fundamentally, we cannot lose sight of the fact that it is children we are looking after and it is children we need to educate. We must send them out ready for the world of work, and not give them the disadvantage of good grades but without the knowledge they need because there was not the time to teach it to them.

2.53 pm

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): First, I thank the schools, teachers and school leaders for working tirelessly throughout the pandemic. A polite way to describe the Government's approach to education throughout the covid-19 pandemic would be "headline grabbing", from the exams debacle and discriminatory algorithms to the unclear guidance on public health measures in education settings, free school meals and January's U-turn on the return to schools. Government planning during the covid crisis has felt a little kneejerk and reactive, and sometimes these reactions have been incredibly slow. Despite the new academic year starting in September, the exam scandal last summer, and a chorus of requests from teaching unions and educators, Ministers only today published their plans for using teacher-assessed grades. It does sometimes feel as though things are being made up as we go along. That is why this debate is so important—it allows us to have a clear road map for young people, parents and educators so that we all know the plan and no one is left behind.

I want to focus on one group that has at times been completely ignored during the public health crisis: children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities, and their families. This debate is about national education route maps for schools and colleges in response to the outbreak. Any route map must

acknowledge the journey that many SEND families have already been on during this crisis and plot a way forward for them too.

Even before coronavirus, SEND provision was in crisis. Both the Education Committee and the Public Accounts Committee have provided damning assessments of the state of education for people with SEND. Now we are still awaiting the SEND review, which has again been delayed. Ministers have explained that the multiple delays have been caused by the public health crisis, but covid-19 gives more of a reason to publish this review, not less. I sit on the Public Accounts Committee, where I have heard care home witnesses say that people with learning disabilities were very much ignored at the start of the pandemic. We were discussing PPE provision, but I think it is a fair summary of how people are feeling, and the same can be said for education.

I have heard similar evidence while chairing the all-party parliamentary group for special educational needs and disabilities during our inquiry into provision during covid-19. SEND families have faced massive amounts of pressure throughout this public health crisis. Many have had difficulties getting online and significant problems accessing their equipment for home learning. We have also heard first hand the experiences of young people taking assessments, from outperforming teachers' best grades to not having the correct equipment in language listening exams. The announcement today on teacher-assessed grades is a step forward, but we need to ensure that SEND children—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I am afraid the hon. Lady has exceeded her time.

2.57 pm

Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab) [V]: I pay tribute to the schools and colleges in the Jarrow constituency that have gone the extra mile during this pandemic in ensuring that the impact on their pupils' learning has been as minimal as possible. We must not forget that schools have never really been fully closed.

I want to see all children and all young people safely back in schools, colleges and higher education for their learning and wellbeing without any further disruption. This must be a priority. However, the Government must do everything to prevent a return to the scenes of last year where school staff and children were having to isolate, often multiple times, meaning further lost learning, further disruption, and an increase in infection rates in the community. The Government must rethink and set out a plan to introduce measures including effective mass testing, creating space with Nightingale classrooms, improving ventilation, vaccinating school staff, and increasing the financial support to allow schools to introduce covid safety measures.

Although cases are falling, along with hospitalisation rates, it remains true that cases are three times higher now than when schools reopened last September. From September to December 2020, covid infection rates rose among secondary and primary age groups, which meant that by Christmas, secondary students were the most infected age group and primaries the second most infected. Rushing all pupils back to school on 8 March without all safety measures effectively in place could potentially see our schools become once again, in the Prime Minister's words, a "vector of transmission" into the community.

[Kate Osborne]

Why not take the same route as the devolved nations, whose cautious, phased approach to school opening will enable their Governments to assess the impact that a return to the classroom will have on the R rate and to make necessary adjustments to their plans? This is surely the common-sense approach, because the current plan to test all secondary school pupils three times on-site is a huge logistical challenge and will have a massive impact on teaching and learning time. That lost teaching time will undoubtedly have a knock-on effect on the wellbeing and mental health of children, and there is no long-term plan in the Government's education recovery package to mitigate this. It would be better to plan and implement a successful and sustainable wider opening alongside vaccinating education staff as a priority. I urge the Minister and the Government to get it right this time to ensure that this is the final return to school and that they are guided by the science, along with listening to the trade unions, whose members work in this sector and who know how this should be done. I ask that the Health and Education Ministers listen to this and act.

3 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: The return to fully opening schools cannot afford to place children as the canaries in the mine for the first stage of easement, but must ensure that they and the whole school community are kept safe. The push to get all children in school led to nearly three months of children being out of school and infections spreading. Advice was ignored, with costly consequences, not least to children's education. The Government have since failed to provide Nightingale classrooms, despite high class density levels—in fact, the highest in Europe and, likewise, here in York—so will the Government permit school leaders to apply a rota system where necessary to keep children safe? With the warmer weather coming, greater ventilation will be possible, but right now it is not.

Infection rates in York are higher now than they were at the end of the last lockdown, and the Kent variant accounts for the vast majority of cases. We are concerned that from 8 March we will see infection rates rise again, as the Prime Minister has warned. The Government must recognise the holistic needs of every young person or we will not see recovery, but an embedding of harm. If they are to process their learning, attention must be paid to the anxiety and wider challenges that children have experienced. Just 43p per child is simply insufficient. A wise Government would invest in their future, and I seek to understand how a Government value a child's recovery so little.

Will the Minister assure the House that children have a greater balance to aid recovery, from sport and creative opportunities to space to talk, reflect and process? More professional wellbeing and mental health services will be necessary for some, but the Government are still unclear about how this will be sufficiently delivered. Recovery will take time, so we must see long-term investment in children's wellbeing. As well as that, we have stressed-out teachers, who have worked so hard over this time. They need recovery, too, and investment, and listening to their needs is crucial now.

With regards to catch-up plans, additional support must be focused on in-class support for children who have fallen behind. However, I have serious concerns about the proposals for bootcamps during evenings, weekends and school holidays. How much more of this social experiment and harm must children participate in? Instead, can we seek an opportunity of a schools-plus programme? Modules of supervised learning should be made available for school leavers to acquire further skills and knowledge, maintaining a relationship with education while pursuing their futures. A schools-plus programme of blended learning should not only address lost learning, but be a starting point for young people to continue their learning journey and pursue their life goals.

My final words go to young people. This is your future. You have been brave and resilient and must have a stake in all that happens. Government talk about you but not to you. From this point, you must have a real say in your future, too. This must be the catch-up on learning that the Government need to make.

3.3 pm

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): I do welcome the fact that we will be having schools go back on 8 March. Frankly, bearing in mind the circumstances, I do not think the Government had much option other than to outline the plan they have for assessment. I am sure there will be some shortcomings with it, but, frankly, I do not think there is any alternative that would not have its own shortcomings. That is just the reality of the situation.

In terms of school closures and the impact they have had, we know from a lot of the studies that it tends to be the most disadvantaged who have been impacted the most. I would like to say one word about the Roma community in Ipswich—a group for which, for all the pupils, English is not their first language. A lot of schools in Ipswich were making real progress before the pandemic, but, unfortunately, that has gone backwards and, actually, the levels of participation in online learning have been below the average for the town. I really think, when we are looking at catch-up, the point about pupils who do not have English as their first language needs to be looked at.

As for SEND, I sometimes feel like a bit of a broken record going on about it, and particularly dyslexic and dyspraxic pupils, but I make no apologies for mentioning it again here today. We know that often these pupils struggle with online learning. We know that those with education, health and care plans have often been eligible to go to school but not those who do not have those plans. As somebody with dyslexia and dyspraxia myself, I really would not want to be in a position of having gone through this and not having that real-time engagement in the classroom and often, actually, not having enough engagement online either.

On assessment methods, I used to quite like exams as a dyspraxic pupil because I did not learn in the same way as everybody else. I was not a conventional learner; often my teachers thought I was a bit backward in class, but I would surprise people at the exam because I could consolidate my knowledge—go away, do my own thing, come out and perform. I think some of the pupils should feed into teachers' decisions about whether there should be tests. I would have said, "Please—I would like a test." I would like the Minister to reflect on that.

Finally, on skills and apprenticeships, I was incredibly excited about the FE White Paper. I know that the Minister, as a former apprentice, is all over this, but I would just like to say that Suffolk would like to be a trailblazer for the new skills improvement plans. My hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) and I are both backing that because we both represent communities with pockets of real deprivation.

I have forgotten the number of times I have spoken to businesses that say, “Look, we have good, skilled jobs coming down the pipeline, but people locally do not have the skills to take them.” We must get local businesses talking to colleges—forming a relationship, influencing and shaping the curriculum, and being part of careers advice from an early stage. When I look at the route map and the opportunity to do things differently, I am incredibly excited that Suffolk, including Ipswich, could be part of that. My plea, as always, would be that special educational needs kids need our support to achieve their potential.

3.6 pm

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab) [V]: I begin by paying tribute to teachers and education staff in Coventry South and across the country. This past year they have once again demonstrated their incredible commitment to education, working flat out. Thank you to all the educators in Coventry South, in particular to Coventry National Education Union, which started the “Coventry learning pack” campaign to promote remote learning resources for working-class kids in the city.

However, teaching staff are again being put in an impossible situation by the Government. On Monday, just as the Prime Minister confirmed the “big bang” reopening of schools in England, minutes from a SAGE meeting were published showing that the Government’s own top scientists recommended a phased reopening of schools. When I challenged the Prime Minister about that on Monday, highlighting his shocking pandemic record, with more than 120,000 covid deaths, he responded with jokes and parliamentary theatrics. Well, I do not think there is anything funny about tens of thousands of avoidable deaths or recklessly ignoring the science yet again. Once more, I urge the Government: listen to scientists and education unions and follow the devolved Administrations with a phased reopening of schools in England.

There is so much more that the Government could be doing to make sure that schools are safe. They have ignored calls for Nightingale schools, for measures to ensure small classroom sizes and for teachers to be vaccinated as a priority group. Teachers, again, will be put in poorly ventilated rooms with dozens of children and no added protection against the virus. It is not just schools, as nurseries in my constituency tell me that they have not been given adequate additional support. Having to stay open through this lockdown while trying to implement covid safety measures has been unmanageable. With early years not having been given extra financial support this lockdown, nurseries’ already precarious financial situation has been made worse. Like school staff, nursery staff love their jobs, but they are being asked to work incredibly hard with pay that simply does not reflect their contribution.

The Education Secretary said that no child’s prospects should be blighted by the pandemic, but the truth is that, even before the pandemic, young people’s futures

were already blighted by his Government’s education cuts and the deepening child poverty crisis. Per-pupil spending has fallen by nearly 10% in the past decade; in a classroom of 30 children, nine on average are living in poverty. Now, the pandemic has highlighted the flaws in the education system. We need to address them. That means tackling child poverty by building a humane social security system, funding mental health services for young people, and reorientating our education system so that it is geared towards learning and the wellbeing of children, with a proper recognition of and funding for our teachers and schools.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The final contribution from the Back Benches will come from Miriam Cates.

3.9 pm

Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con): There is no more urgent task for Government right now than getting children back into school. I am delighted with the Prime Minister’s announcement that schools can reopen from 8 March, and I welcome the additional £700 million of catch-up funding, setting out a clear framework towards recovery.

Many children have suffered greatly over the last year, prevented from going to school, banned from seeing grandparents and kept indoors, inactive, isolated and spending hundreds of hours in front of a screen. Our children have not only missed out on learning. In many cases, they have lost confidence, motivation and purpose. I know that the Government have gone to great lengths to deliver online learning and support families financially, but I want to reflect for a moment on how society as a whole has allowed this harm to happen to our most vulnerable and most voiceless citizens during a pandemic that poses almost no risk to children’s physical health.

Over recent years, we have prided ourselves on our enlightened attitude to children, critical of the Victorians for their view that children should be seen and not heard. But this year, in 21st-century Britain, our children have been both unseen and unheard, with the harms that many have experienced only now becoming apparent. That is why we must strain every sinew to restore what has been lost to our children. I am heartened by the Government’s commitment to prioritise catch-up over the coming years, but this recommitment to children must extend beyond the academic. This year, we have seen how much more our schools offer than just the three Rs, and many families have all but collapsed without the social, relational and even medical support provided by schools.

Perhaps our brilliant schools have for some time been masking a deep social crisis: a crisis in family life. The charity Mental Health Innovations reports that in its conversations with children under 13, 55% say that they have no one else to talk to. Many families are in crisis, led by a steady, stealthy degrading of the role of families and the value of parenting. The trend towards more and more parents working longer and longer hours has done wonders for our GDP but caused harm to our children. Being a parent is one of the most important roles that any of us can have and has more long-term impact on society and the economy than almost anything else we do. But parenting takes time, effort and a huge amount of emotional resilience—resources that are in

[*Miriam Cates*]

short supply when stressed parents are working long hours in a tax system that does not recognise family responsibility, and they have little energy to spare.

I welcome the Government's dedicated and ambitious approach to academic catch-up in schools, but if we really want to restore to our children what has been lost, we should also look again at how we can empower and support parents to deliver their crucial role in our children's success.

3.12 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): This has been an excellent debate, and I congratulate the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) and colleagues on securing it and the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) on the admirable way in which he stepped in to open it.

I want to begin by thanking staff in schools up and down the country for the extraordinary effort they have made during the most extraordinary year. We might think, from reading some of the headlines and some of the remarks from politicians, that schools have been closed and people have had their feet up, but I do not know a single member of school staff who has not worked harder in the last year than they have in their entire careers. We owe them a debt of thanks. We owe it to them to listen to them, to trust their expertise and to make sure that there are arrangements in place for the safe opening of schools from 8 March.

This debate is about the future and the longer-term future. I want to take this opportunity to imagine where we might be over the next decade, to consider where we have been in the last decade and to perhaps learn some lessons from the decade before. There is no doubt that, despite the best efforts of staff in schools, parents and all those across the country who care about the fortunes of children and young people, lockdown has had a serious and detrimental impact on education and wellbeing.

That is why the announcement earlier this week of catch-up funding and support from Government was so depressingly predictable and so predictably disappointing. It betrays a lack of ambition for our children and our country's future, with 43p per pupil per day to catch up on lost learning and a claim of £700 million, £300 million of which had already been announced in January. The Department for Education refuses to tell us whether the remaining £405 million is new money from the Treasury or existing money from departmental budgets; I hope the Minister can be clear about that this afternoon. Just yesterday, in response to my question, the Prime Minister stood at the Dispatch Box boasting of £2 billion in investment. Of course, he was double-counting the £300 million, and so much more is needed.

We should not be surprised, because in fact the biggest risk to children's education, their wellbeing and their futures is not a deadly virus and a pandemic that will pass; it is a decade of Conservative party policy, which has left this country with rising child poverty, an attainment gap that is widening, and school funding lower in real terms today than it was when Labour left office. Indeed, in last year's annual report the Education Policy Institute estimated that on the last five-year trend it would take 500 years to close the attainment gap.

The Department for Education's own figures, published in January, estimate the level of lost learning in reading at secondary level at 0.6 months in London, 0.9 months in the south-east, 2.5 months in the west midlands, 2.8 months in Yorkshire and the Humber, and 3.3 months in the north-east. The crisis in lost learning initiated this debate, but before the pandemic, after 10 years of the Conservatives being in government, at GCSE the attainment gap between those from the most and the least disadvantaged backgrounds was 16.2 months in English and 17.5 months in maths.

By region, some pupils were a full two years behind by the time they took their GCSEs—26.3 months in Blackpool, 24.7 months in Knowsley, and 24.5 months in Plymouth—and, as we have heard in contributions from colleagues across the House, the state of support for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities falls well short of what those pupils deserve. I commend the hon. Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) for, as he put it, banging on about this; he has to carry on banging on about this, because what we have, and what we have had, simply is not good enough.

The lack of ambition was not just in the funding this week; it was in the package itself. Let us give kids a summer to look forward to, I absolutely agree, but where is the joined-up thinking? Why are we not mobilising charities, youth groups and wraparound childcare providers, which have been battered during the course of the pandemic, to step up and give kids a summer that they will never forget? Why is it that the national tutoring programme, even with this additional funding, still will not reach every child on free school meals, let alone meet the enormous need that exists beyond the most disadvantaged? As Natalie Perera, chief executive of the EPI said:

"The new recovery premium is a step in the right direction, but £6,000 for the average primary school and £22,000 for the average secondary is much too modest to make a serious difference."

It is not even enough to recruit one teacher per school.

Indeed, where was the reference to teaching? All the evidence shows that, if we want to make the most difference to children's life chances and opportunities, and close the attainment gap, investing in teaching, high-quality teaching and more teaching is the best way to do it. Where is the ambition to recruit a new generation into teaching? Where is the call-up for those who have left the profession early or have retired to step into the breach—to mobilise the cavalry, reduce class sizes, and enable more small group and one-to-one teaching?

The only inspired choice that the Government have made is to appoint Sir Kevan Collins to lead the work on catch-up, but I have to say that he has his work cut out for him. Only days ago, the Government's own outgoing Children's Commissioner said:

"Two weeks ago the Prime Minister said educational catch-up was the key focus of the entire Government—yet we still don't know if next month",

which is now next week,

"he is planning to take the Universal Credit uplift away from millions of families. The two positions aren't compatible."

She described

"an institutional bias against children",

which I think is the most damning indictment of Ministers and senior officials of all. She said:

"I have to force officials and ministers to the table, to watch them sit through a presentation, maybe ask a question, and then vacantly walk away."

We will never succeed unless the Government understand that the conditions outside the school gates do so much to determine what happens within them. There are now 4.2 million children in this country living in poverty. Before the pandemic, the Social Mobility Commission estimated that, as a result of the Government's policies, that would rise to 5.2 million by 2022. The number of people living in temporary accommodation in this country has risen not just every year since 2011 but every quarter, and the number of families with children living in bed and breakfasts has increased since 2010.

It did not need to be like this. If the Government want a route map to a future of closing the attainment gap, lifting millions of children out of poverty and ensuring a bright future for this country, they need look no further than the record of the last Labour Government. Funding per pupil doubled. There were 48,000 more teachers, 230,000 more support staff and teaching assistants, 2,200 Sure Start children's centres and record numbers of university places. We doubled the number of apprenticeships, and we recognised that families and family conditions matter, which is why we put child benefit up by 26% and gave working parents the child tax credit. The new deal helped 1.8 million people into work. A million social homes were brought up to a decent standard. Three million children received child trust funds. The impact of that was to lift 2 million children out of poverty, produce record levels of literacy and numeracy and narrow the attainment gap.

In conclusion, 11 years of Tory Government have inflicted more damage on the life chances and opportunities of children than a virus ever could. So long as the Prime Minister and his party are in the driving seat, I fear that even the best road map will inevitably see us driven on a road to nowhere.

3.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan): I, too, thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) and the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) for securing this debate, and I thank all Members for their contributions. I was listening hard, and I will try my best to address all the points that they have raised. I, too, add my thanks to the amazing teachers and teaching staff, to parents and to everyone who has been involved for their continued dedication and commitment to delivering high-quality education—face-to-face and remotely—to all pupils during this truly unprecedented period.

Education has been a national priority throughout the pandemic. When we took the decision to ask schools and colleges to restrict attendance, that was done to reduce the overall number of social contacts in our communities, not because schools and colleges had become significantly less safe. Many have said they were delighted when the Prime Minister announced a full return to face-to-face learning, and our focus must be on supporting children and young people and on reversing the negative effects of the pandemic and the time they have had out of school. The best place to start on that is in school or college. Most teachers and pupils cannot wait, and that is not to mention the parents.

We know there has been strong support for face-to-face education. East Kent College polled its learners just a couple of days ago and found that 97% wanted to return to on-site education.¹ As pupils return, testing is

key. As my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester said, we need to rise to the logistics and scale of the challenge. School and college staff are already playing a vital role in rapid asymptomatic testing, with around 97% of all eligible schools and colleges equipped to deliver testing and more than 4 million tests being delivered across educational settings. We will see that can-do attitude, which was talked about by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) and my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester, across our country with all our school and college teaching staff.

Alongside our approach to testing, we are extending the use of face coverings to all indoor environments, including classrooms, unless social distancing can be maintained. We are recommending that additional precautionary measure until Easter, when it will be reviewed. We know that the introduction has been supported by a number of unions and 82% of adults according to a recent survey, but I note the concern of Members.

Despite the return to on-site provision for as many pupils and students as possible, we are aware of the huge amount of work that must be done to support education catch-up. My right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow rightly highlights disadvantaged children, who are at the heart of the Government's focus. They are now performing better than 10 years ago in 2011, with the attainment gap narrowed by 13% at 11 and 9% at 16. As someone who went to a Knowsley comprehensive school, I know first-hand the impact that disadvantage has on life chances. I was interested to hear the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) talk about what a decade of Conservative Government could do, and I hope he was looking at those fantastic figures showing the attainment gap narrowing, which are the result of our school standards and our approach to education over the past decade. If he wants to look at the figures, I will repeat them again: the gap has narrowed by 13% at 11 and 9% at 16 since 2011. We will rightly focus on helping those young people catch up.

We have a £1.7 billion catch-up fund, but it has to be outcomes-driven, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow mentioned. The Department has commissioned an independent research agency to analyse catch-up needs and monitor progress over the academic year, which will help us understand the extent to which pupils may have fallen behind and how the impact of postponed learning is felt differently across the country.

As many hon. Members have mentioned, we have appointed an education recovery commissioner, Sir Kevan Collins, who will advise Ministers on the approach for education recovery. We will work with him and the education sector to develop specific initiatives for summer schools. A number of people mentioned summer schools, including my hon. Friend the Member for Burton (Kate Griffiths), who said that many schools in her area have already started to plan a wide range of summer activities. I know that my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow supports summer schools and the covid premium to support educational recovery.

School sports were mentioned. Remote PE lessons have been available from Oak National Academy, but no one can wait to get back to the sports fields, so more funding has been made available to enable school sports facilities to stay open longer, and much of this will involve community and volunteers, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) said.

1. [Official Report, 8 March 2021, Vol. 690, c. 3MC.]

[Gillian Keegan]

The pandemic has shone a light on the life-changing role that teachers play in children's lives, and it has inspired many others. We now have 41,500 trainee schoolteachers being recruited in 2020-21. That is an increase of 23% compared with 2019-20. Teachers and educators have worked tirelessly to support children and will continue to do so throughout, with many teaching their pupils while—let us not forget—also supporting the learning of their own children at home.

Throughout the pandemic, vulnerable children have been prioritised for on-site attendance. Early years, special schools, special post-16 providers and alternative provision have remained open throughout to vulnerable children and young people. As we move to full reopening, clinically extremely vulnerable children will still be advised to shield until 31 March and to continue with remote education, as will those children who test positive, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham mentioned. That is why we strengthened our remote education expectations in January, with more than 1 million devices delivered to vulnerable children and 300,000 more to come. Schools are expected to deliver three to five hours of remote education to those who will continue with remote learning. I am also grateful to BT and EE for providing free access to BBC Bitesize resources from the end of January 2021.

All Members have mentioned concerns about the impact on children's mental health. We know that we need to improve support for children's and other people's mental health. This is not a new issue, but it has been further impacted by the pandemic. That is why we are committed to investing in, expanding and transforming mental health services in England. We have committed an additional £2.3 billion of funding a year, and 345,000 more children and young people will be able to get additional access and support by 2023-24. This builds on our existing support, including our £8 million wellbeing for education return scheme, which has provided funding for expert advisers training in every local authority area, and more than £10 million of funding to mental health charities, including Mind, Samaritans, YoungMinds and Bipolar UK, many of which were mentioned by the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West).

We need to increase awareness. In February, the Prime Minister appointed Dr Alex George as youth mental health ambassador to advise the Government and raise awareness of mental health. We are also setting up a mental health in education action group, which he will sit on.

I thank the House for this opportunity to discuss the route map for schools and colleges in response to the covid-19 pandemic. We continue to be impressed by the resilience and positivity of everybody involved—parents, students and, of course, teachers—throughout these difficult times. I know that the whole country will be delighted that children are returning to schools and colleges, and will once again see their families and get the education that they deserve.¹

3.28 pm

Steve Brine: I will wrap up the debate. Every speaker thanked and praised their teachers and support staff for the work that they have done, and rightly so. Everyone touched on that challenge in one way, shape or form, whether they spoke about eating disorders or about general anxiety and mental health. I thought the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) put it well when she said that pupils cannot catch up educationally if they are struggling emotionally. I think we would all agree with that. A number of colleagues touched on the whole issue of the chance, perhaps, for a radical rethink of our educational offering and exams, for instance, and maybe that is right.

Let me finish by thanking the Backbench Business Committee for agreeing to today's debate, all those Members who put their name to it, and, of course, the Chair of the Education Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), for opening the debate alongside us today. I thank him for his comments, especially when he said that there is no room for negativity in achieving what we need to achieve in education full stop, but especially around the catch-up that is needed. We need a plan for education and we need a plan for positivity, and if we can all do that, we might get somewhere.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the proposal for a national education route map for schools and colleges in response to the covid-19 outbreak.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I am now going to suspend the House for three minutes in order that arrangements can be made for the next item of business.

3.30 pm

Sitting suspended.

1. [Official Report, 8 March 2021, Vol. 690, c. 4MC.]

Welsh Affairs

[*Relevant documents: Fifth Report of the Welsh Affairs Committee, Session 2019-21, Brexit and trade: implications for Wales, HC 176; Fourth Report of the Welsh Affairs Committee, Session 2019-21, Wales and the Shared Prosperity Fund: Priorities for the replacement of EU structural funds, HC 90; and the Government Response, HC 1083; Oral evidence taken before the Welsh Affairs Committee on 28 May 2020, 10 September 2020 and 14 January 2021, on Responsibilities of the Secretary of State for Wales, HC 96.*]

3.33 pm

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab) [V]: I beg to move,

That this House has considered Welsh affairs.

Thank you very much for calling me, Madam Deputy Speaker. Prynhawn da; diolch yn fawr. I thank the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) and the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) for supporting the application to the Backbench Business Committee, and I thank the Committee for granting this time this afternoon, although it is and always has been my view that time should be set aside every year, as a permanent fixture of the UK parliamentary calendar, to debate the affairs of Wales on or around St David's Day, which occurs on 1 March, next week.

I want to open on a sad note, by paying tribute to the former Member for Aberavon, Hywel Francis, who died earlier this month. Hywel entered the House nearly 20 years ago, alongside me and other current Members from Wales, my hon. Friends the Members for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and for Caerphilly (Wayne David), my right hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami), and the hon. Member for Arfon.

It will not surprise hon. Members and others listening who knew Hywel that, in his maiden speech back in 2001, he spoke about Labour history, the miners' strike of 1984, Welsh devolution and the rights of disabled people, the latter a subject that was personally very close to Hywel and his wife Mair and their family. In calling, in that speech, for equal rights for disabled people, he said:

"Those are, after all, universal rights, whether they apply to a disabled child in Soweto, or to a disabled miner or steelworker in Skewen."—[*Official Report*, 25 June 2001; Vol. 370, c. 456.]

Typical of Hywel: a voice for the oppressed everywhere, an internationalist voice, a compassionate socialist voice, a distinctly Welsh voice. Rest in peace, good friend and comrade.

Circumstances mean that I am participating in today's debate from Wales's capital city. I recently heard a quote about Cardiff from the late, great Victoria Wood, who said it was

"classy and yet somehow seedy at the same time"—

surely the slogan to put on our road signs; but in truth Cardiff has developed in the last 20 years, in the era of devolution, into a classy capital city that truly feels like a modern capital, with a vibrant cultural sector and the seat of the elected Government of Wales. Wales is second only to London in percentage growth, for example, in music tourism in recent times, not least here in Cardiff itself; and this Saturday, in normal times, our streets would be thronged with people for the Six Nations rugby

encounter between Wales and England. Sadly, there will be no crowds this Saturday, but millions will watch on free-to-air public service television. I say to the Welsh Rugby Union: do not lock this important part of our sporting culture in a dark cupboard behind a paywall. All Wales's Six Nations matches must remain free to air in Wales in any new broadcasting deal.

However, I do not want to talk just about union as in rugby union today; I want to say a few words about the state of the Union of the United Kingdom, and Wales's place in it. Any union, whether a sporting union, or a trade union, or a political union of nations, can exist only with the consent of its members, and that consent can only be obtained through a culture of respect. I am genuinely worried that the UK Government, Prime Minister and current Secretary of State for Wales do not understand that. We read that the Union unit, set up at the heart of Whitehall to save the Union, has been so disunited itself and so beset by brutal rows that it has had to be disbanded. Well, if the Government cannot even keep their own unit in charge of unity united, what hope is there that they can keep the United Kingdom united?

But all may not be lost, because the Union unit is being replaced, we are told, by a Cabinet Committee consisting of—I quote from the press—

"Prime Minister Boris Johnson, Welsh Secretary Simon Hart, Scottish Secretary"

Alister Jack,

"Northern Ireland Secretary Brandon Lewis and other Cabinet members."

They are to

"discuss how best to save"

the United Kingdom. Well, forgive me if I am sceptical that this news will have people running down to the bookies to put money on the improved chances of the survival of the Union, because the problem is, there is no evidence here of any understanding of that principle of consent and respect. In fact, we have clear evidence to the contrary from the Secretary of State for Wales himself. While aggressively undermining the democratically elected Welsh Senedd and Government by centralising spending powers from Wales, this week he said:

"I do wish Welsh Government would stop fretting about their own little status in Cardiff".

Those words—

"their own little status in Cardiff"—

contain not an ounce of respect for Welsh voters and the two referendums that established elected devolved institutions in Wales.

I say to the Secretary of State that he is treading a dangerous path. He has revealed that he has had no respect for Wales's democratic institutions, choosing instead to look down his nose from Gwydyr House, sneering those words—

"their own little status"—

with reference to the elected Government of Wales. I presume he will soon be getting fitted for his Governor-General's costume and plumed hat at this rate.

I sometimes hear colleagues say that these constitutional issues do not matter. They say, "I have never heard anyone on the Ely omnibus talk about devolved powers." That may be right, but they do matter to the things people

[Kevin Brennan]

really care and talk about, and which affect their everyday lives, including those riding with a bus pass on the No. 17.

It does matter to Welsh people that they have the right to elect a Government who genuinely reflect their values and aspirations, and who are empowered to make real changes that affect their lives. Devolution has allowed those values of the Welsh people to be expressed in progressive policies that are an alternative to neoliberalism and to running the country in favour of the wealthiest through crony capitalism.

It does matter to people in Wales that their NHS has been true to its Welsh roots, with free prescriptions and freedom from market-driven motives and privatisation. The UK Government are now mimicking that, after the abject failure of the experiment in competition under the Lansley reforms.

It does matter that Wales can decide to have an integrated public transport system, which was denied by the centre to all but London until recently, with rail brought back into public control, bringing Wales in line with modern European countries. It does matter to people that their education system remains free from divisive selection, with local governance and free of outsourcing and fragmentation.

In this covid crisis, it has mattered to people that the Welsh Labour Government have not ducked or delayed difficult decisions, but have always put health and welfare first. They have struck better deals on personal protective equipment for the NHS and social care because of their public service values, rather than turning to expensive and dubious outsourcing, which has failed repeatedly. It has mattered to people that Wales has had a successful, publicly run contract tracing service, rather than a massively wasteful, outsourced chumocracy.

It also matters that in Mark Drakeford, Wales has a First Minister who is rightly praised for integrity, difficult decision making, grasp of detail and open communication, in contrast to a Prime Minister held hostage by headlines and headbangers. Now is not the time for empire Unionism from the Welsh Secretary or the Prime Minister; now is the time to recognise that this voluntary Union of four nations can function only through equality, respect for devolution and a commitment to enhance and develop our democratic institutions in Wales and the other nations and regions of the United Kingdom.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): There is an immediate time limit on Back-Bench speeches of three minutes.

3.42 pm

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I start by putting on the record my condolences to the family of Dr Hywel Francis, one of my predecessors as Chairman of the Welsh Affairs Committee. He was a man of huge intelligence and wisdom, and a very caring man. He will be missed enormously.

This St David's Day debate is happening still under the shadow of the pandemic, but with very much better days just ahead as a result of the extraordinary national vaccination effort. We had something of a slow start in Wales, but I have no hesitation whatever in saluting

what has been achieved over the last three months right across Wales. There were calls from some quarters for Wales to have its own vaccine strategy. Plaid Cymru pushed the line that Wales should cut loose from the rest of the UK when it came to procuring vaccines. It and its Welsh Labour allies also wanted us to be locked into the disastrous EU vaccine programme.

Now, with more than a third of the adult population in Wales having received a first dose, we can see the clear value of being part of an independent, UK-led strategy. The UK Government were able to move quickly and with strength to secure those vital early vaccine supplies, to the benefit of all parts of the United Kingdom. That, for me, is the value of the Union in action. Or we could point to the sheer financial firepower that has been brought to bear during the crisis. There have been billions of pounds of additional support for Wales, and hundreds of thousands of workers across Wales have had their livelihoods protected. That was possible only because at the heart of our United Kingdom, there is a powerful redistributive fiscal union.

For all that, there is a concerted effort under way to use the pandemic to weaken the bonds of our United Kingdom and to argue for division and separation. The Scottish National party and Plaid Cymru spokespeople will argue for exactly that later on. The question for me today, having listened to the speech by the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), is: where exactly is Welsh Labour when it comes to the Union? There was a time when Welsh Labour was a force for Unionism in this country. However, when I hear Welsh Labour politicians talk down and devalue the efforts of the United Kingdom, when I hear them wanting to stop the UK Government actually spending money on projects in Wales, when I hear them cynically stoke up the rhetoric about the English-Welsh border—and they know exactly what they are doing when they do that—and when I hear them criticise and delegitimise the visits to Wales of the UK Prime Minister, I fear that they have turned their backs on the Union and thrown in their lot with the nationalists.

I believe passionately that one can be a fierce, proud Welsh man or woman and that also alongside that one can be proudly British. There is no contradiction there, and for me perhaps the most powerful and attractive thing of all about our Union is that it does not force us to choose our identities. On that note, I wish a happy St David's Day—*Dydd Gŵyl Dewi Sant hapus*—to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to all fellow Welsh Members of the House of Commons.

3.45 pm

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: I echo the remarks about my dear friend Hywel Francis, whose legacy spreads across south Wales and beyond. I will miss Hywel more than words can say, and my thoughts are with Mair, Hannah, Dafydd and Hywel's many friends and comrades.

Wales is a special country. Its people are parochial, but we are also internationalists in all the best ways. We have a history of social solidarity that is unrivalled: the miners' friendship with American actor, singer and civil rights activist Paul Robeson; miners' contributions to the fight against fascism; the father of co-operation, Robert Owen; and the fact that the NHS was born in Wales.

In my wonderful constituency, we are proud of our cultural heritage and global reach, which served us well during the miners' strike of 1984-85. Support groups sprang up in the Neath, Dulais and Swansea valleys, with the same resilience and commitment to equality, justice and fairness as those miners who joined the international brigades. Education partnerships were forged across the world, such as the community university of the valleys and those with mining communities in Appalachia. The film "Pride" told the story of London's lesbian and gay community supporting miners' communities in my constituency during the strike.

The miners' strike produced long-lasting community organisations such as Canolfan Maerdy, Glynneath Training Centre and Dove Workshop. The coronavirus pandemic has produced many more, with hundreds of street champions delivering food parcels and medication to the vulnerable and shielding. I am proud of the multi-agency working between Swansea Bay University Health Board, Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council and South Wales police before, during and, no doubt, beyond this pandemic. It has been truly humbling to see the exceptional commitment in the fight against this terrible virus, with people working long hours and seamlessly within and between organisations.

Despite more than a decade of Tory austerity and UK Government cuts across Wales, the Welsh Labour Government are leading on partnership working, which is the embodiment of compassion, co-operation and solidarity. The Welsh Labour Government have provided an extra £500 million to local authorities to deliver key services, made a special commitment of £500 to more than 67,000 social care staff and continued their commitment to free school meals during school holidays up to Easter 2022, feeding over 105,000 children in Wales. Businesses in Wales have accessed the most generous support package in the UK. The £2 billion economic resilience fund alone has secured over 141,000 jobs in Wales. As Hywel would say, history is on our side.

3.48 pm

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): I echo the comments made about Hywel Francis, and my sympathies go to his family, particularly his daughter, who was in the same class as me at school.

This debate comes at a time when many claim that the Union of the UK is under pressure. I am more optimistic in that the benefits of the Union have really come to the fore this year, with the unprecedented financial assistance to businesses, families and the devolved Administrations, as we have heard; the combined might of the UK to research and source vaccines; and the benefit of the stability from the borrowing capacity that only the UK Government could achieve on world markets. These benefits to our four nations are recognised widely among the public, in spite of the ever-noisy demands for independence regularly exaggerated by the BBC.

Separate to those issues, however, I was previously concerned that Whitehall's approach to the nations was feeding calls for greater separation. The "devolve and forget" attitude became endemic among officials after 1999, with responsibilities simply passed on to the devolved Administrations irrespective of whether a four-nation approach would deliver better outcomes. Central to that is the Treasury. On the one hand it was keen to act positively and, rightly, increase resources for Wales. We adjusted the Barnett settlement and introduced a

funding floor, resulting in Wales receiving £120 for every £100 spent in England—much more than under Labour. That was done out of respect for devolution—recognising the need but not interfering—but it missed the point. Wales needed an active interest from Whitehall Departments, and that is why I argued for the UK shared prosperity fund to be established at the outset and for funds to be retained for its implementation.

Recent announcements on the shared prosperity fund and, yesterday, the levelling-up fund are such good news for communities in Wales—the strength of the Union coming to support areas that have been left behind. My request is for that to be followed through. The allocation of funding and the power to spend are fundamental, and the Government should be congratulated. However, we still need an active interest from Whitehall in understanding and delivering for communities in Wales. In my constituency, there is a desperate need for a railway station in St Athan and a marina in Barry as part of my regeneration plans and ambitions. Those issues have been rejected by the Welsh Government, and until now the UK Government have had no means by which to step in. I want those two projects to be at the top of the Secretary of State's spending list.

3.52 pm

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): I begin by paying tribute to Hywel Francis, the former Member for Aberavon. Hywel was a good friend for many years. He was a great socialist, a distinguished historian, an effective parliamentarian and a staunch internationalist. He will be missed by many in Wales and beyond.

We are in a difficult and unprecedented time, and so many people in Wales have responded, and are still responding, extremely well to the challenges we all face. The forbearance and resilience of my Caerphilly constituents is quite amazing, but everyone accepts that there is still some way to go before this virus is defeated. As well as my constituents, I pay tribute to the staff of the Aneurin Bevan University Health Board, whose dedication to the tasks before them is simply incredible. In the health board area as a whole, the incidence of covid-19 is reducing. It is now 76.4 per 100,000 people, down from 83.6 the previous week. The situation within hospitals is improving as well, with the number of covid-19 patients in intensive care and the number of patients testing positive in in-patient beds both reducing significantly.

On vaccinations, things are also encouraging. In care homes, every member of staff and every resident had been offered a vaccination by the end of January. I am pleased to say that most have been taken up, and advanced plans are in place for second doses. More generally, up to 25 January, 1,184 vaccinations had been given across the health board area through a blend of vaccine centre, GP and mobile team delivery.

Much has been done but, of course, there is still much to do. However, I am happy to be able to say that things are going well in the Greater Gwent area. Undoubtedly, one reason why things are going well is the effective leadership from the First Minister and the Welsh Government, which is in contrast to the dither, delay, U-turns and contradictions that we have seen from the Westminster Conservative Government. It is not just me who is saying that. Last night on BBC Wales Live, Dr Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, made it clear that this was his view as well.

[Wayne David]

So, Madam Deputy Speaker, I am proud of the way my constituents and the authorities are responding to this continuing crisis—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I am so sorry, but the hon. Gentleman has exceeded his three minutes so we have to go directly to Clwyd West and David Jones.

3.55 pm

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I also say how very saddened I was to learn of the death of Hywel Francis, who was quite simply a dear, much-loved friend?

The coronavirus pandemic, of course, is the background to today's Saint David's Day debate and indeed, it has dominated life in Wales for much of the past 12 months. Times have been difficult, but the impressive efficiency of the vaccination programme means that at last we are now able to see the prospect of returning to a life that approaches normality.

The financial support given by the Government to our citizens during this worrying time has been outstanding, and I know from many discussions with constituents just how much it is appreciated, but as we see the increasing positive impact of the vaccine, it is important to consider how people's livelihoods will continue to be secured after we emerge from lockdown. In north Wales, tourism and hospitality are the mainstay of our economy, worth a remarkable £3.6 billion, providing over 46,500 full-time equivalent jobs and bringing in 29 million visitors. The 2020 season was severely disrupted, with a drop in income of an estimated £2.17 billion. It is therefore crucial that as much clarity as possible is given to hospitality business operators as to when and how they may recommence operations in 2021.

In England the Government have set out a clear, though cautious, road map for exiting lockdown. Indeed, one senior representative of the north Wales tourism sector told me only yesterday that the Prime Minister's statement on Monday amounted to what he called light at the end of a very dark tunnel, which, unfortunately, is not being replicated in Wales. If the virus suppression programme proceeds as we all hope, hospitality should reopen in England by mid-May. Sadly, no clarity of the sort given by the Westminster Government has been provided in Wales, and this is a huge concern to north Wales tourism business operators. It is likely that more UK citizens will be taking their holidays domestically this year as a consequence of the disruption of air travel. Families are making their bookings now, but if there is no clarity as to when Wales will be open for business again, they will go to Cornwall, the Lake District or some other part of the country where there is sufficient clarity.

I therefore urge my right hon. Friend and the Government to work closely with the Welsh Government to agree a joint strategy for the reopening of the entire UK hospitality sector. If that is not done, I very much fear that there will be another bleak holiday season in north Wales, with consequent business failures and redundancies, and that is something that none of us wants to see.

3.58 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Diolch, Madam Deputy Speaker. I, too, pay tribute to Hywel Francis, a former colleague, a friend, and Dean of Faculty during my university days.

When I was a child, St David's Day was almost as good as Christmas. We ran into school in our Welsh costumes and watched the boys eating their leeks for lunch and then feeling ill all afternoon. Most children will not have that opportunity to share St David's Day with their friends this year, but their safety is far more important. That is why the Welsh Labour Government have set out a staggered return to the classroom for all our children, starting with the youngest, who return this week, and gradually working our way up. As we have done throughout the pandemic, Welsh Labour Ministers are being careful and cautious, basing their decisions on evidence while working tirelessly to protect our health and our jobs.

Over the past year no one can have escaped experiencing something completely out of their comfort zone. Every MP's office will have been overwhelmed by the increased casework, some of which has been heartbreaking. For my office, one of the biggest issues has been the volume of correspondence regarding the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency. With more than 550 positive cases and a tragic death among the staff, the way that the issue has been dealt with by both the management and the Department for Transport is nothing short of appalling. We are currently in a situation where staff are seriously considering taking strike action as a last resort. They feel—and rightly so—that their safety and wellbeing have been compromised by the UK Government's refusal to address their concerns.

The positive news is that, thanks to the outstanding work of our wonderful NHS staff and volunteers, Wales is leading the way on the vaccine roll-out. This heroic effort, alongside the public's willingness to follow the rules, has been one of the reasons that our number of positive cases has started to drop. In fact, it has halved in Swansea in the past four weeks.

While we all miss the smell of Welsh cakes cooking that usually wafts out of Swansea market on the days running up to St David's Day, this year, by following the restrictions for a little bit longer, we will get through this. While we stay at home this weekend to keep our families safe and to protect the NHS, let us hope we get a triumph of Wales over England in the Six Nations. What joy that would bring us all on St David's Day weekend! Diolch, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Diolch, Carolyn. You seem to have brought the House together. Give my love to Swansea market.

4.1 pm

Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con) [V]: Diolch yn fawr, Mr Dirprwy Lefarydd. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris). This St David's Day debate provides a good opportunity to thank all my constituents who have made sacrifices over the past year to help protect the community. Early this year, I raised concerns about the slower pace of the vaccine roll-out in Wales. I am relieved that significant improvements have been made and that efforts are now generally progressing well in the Vale of Clwyd. In addition

to the tireless efforts of NHS staff and the armed forces, a key driver behind that improvement has been the presence of directly comparable vaccination data across Britain.

The current general shortage of such directly comparable healthcare performance indicators can make objective comparisons difficult. UK-wide data in the NHS, along with aligned inspection mechanisms and audit procedures, would increase transparency. It would allow different regions of the country to recognise both best practice and shortcomings in the service that they are providing, and to work collaboratively to improve. It would allow Ministers and, ultimately, voters to make a more informed decision about the direction they want their health service to take. This is particularly relevant for north Wales, which I suggest would sadly be seen to be falling behind most parts of the UK if such data were available.

The same can be said for infrastructure, where north Wales is in the unenviable position of being overlooked and misunderstood by Cardiff Bay, while UK Government Ministers have, over the past 20 years, had decreasing access to intervene. Mobile phone data from 2019 demonstrates that in normal times, over a 24-hour period, 153,000 journeys are made between north Wales and north-west England. That figure is 20 times higher than the number of journeys from north Wales to other regions of Wales. Despite that, the public transport offering is inadequate. For example, the 65 miles from Prestatyn to central Manchester takes up to 105 minutes on the train, while the same distance is covered in under 50 minutes in many parts of southern England.

In seeking to rectify that, we need to move to a position where the administrative border between England and Wales is not seen as an excuse or a barrier to progress. The all-party parliamentary group on Mersey Dee North Wales, which I chair, has already held constructive talks with the Department for Transport and the Union connectivity review about how to achieve improvements.

Through the Government's levelling-up agenda, including the now UK-wide levelling-up fund, I hope that our regional rail service can begin to receive a much-needed boost, with capacity and line speed enhancements and, ultimately, electrification of the north Wales main line, with efficient connections to High Speed 2 and Northern Powerhouse Rail. Such developments can transform the regional economy and will help the UK to achieve its bold net zero target. Mr Deputy Speaker, Dydd Gŵyl Dewi Sant hapus iawn ymlaen llaw—happy St David's Day in advance.

4.4 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC) [V]: Diolch yn fawr, Mr Dirprwy Lefarydd. I, too, would like to send my party's condolences to the family of Hywel Francis.

Yesterday, the UK Government broadcast their intention to undermine Welsh democracy and the proven priorities of our country with their levelling-up fund. Within the velvet glove of deigning to address regional inequality, the iron fist of Westminster's divide and rule tactics now sets our nations firmly against each other, but of course, the idea that Westminster can single-handedly fix regional inequality is fantasy politics. It is Westminster that has tolerated, facilitated and, at times, marshalled the creation of systematic and structural regional inequalities that

are worse than those in any comparable developed country. In this unequal Union, Wales is, at best, treated as expendable; at worst, our homegrown ambitions are thwarted. Let us take HS2. It is a £100 billion high-speed railway without an imperial inch of track in Wales. Ignoring that and the calculations at HS2 that that will cost Cardiff alone nearly £70 million annually, the UK Government went ahead and classified the project as benefiting—wait for it—both England and Wales. That means that Wales will not receive the full Barnett consequential payments—approximately £5 billion—which we should rightly receive.

On projects actually physically here in Wales, such as the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon, or the electrification of our railways, Westminster has also failed to deliver. In terms of public funding, the same structural bias favours the favoured. Wales receives 42% of the research and development spending per capita of that received by England. Although we have 11% of the UK's railway and 5% of the population, we receive only—wait for it—1% of Westminster rail investment.

I will not pretend that Wales is the only part of the UK hamstrung by Westminster's failures. Only three out of the UK's 12 nations and regions are net contributors to the UK budget, illustrating the real-life repercussions of Westminster's poor economic priorities. Let me be clear: through this levelling-up fund, Westminster is overruling Wales, sidelining our democracy, and dictating our future. The Secretary of State's comments yesterday evening that we should stop fretting about what he terms our "little status" ignores his own insignificance at the Cabinet table and the fact that Wales will lose a fifth of its representation in Westminster in the next Parliament. Perhaps he should reflect on his own role before belittling our democracy. This announcement is a duplicitous mistake, a shameful sham of an election ploy. They are empty words when Wales needs so much better. Decisions affecting Wales should be made in Wales by a Government who are accountable to the people of Wales. This May, vote for Wales.

4.7 pm

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): I, too, would like to offer my condolences to the family of Hywel Francis.

A year ago in the St David's Day debate, I gave my maiden speech. Thinking back to that debate, it seems like another world, given that it was held in the last days before lockdown. Hopefully, with the benefits of the UK Government's highly successful vaccination programme, the end is in sight of the worst of this pandemic.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the frontline workers in Clwyd South and elsewhere in Wales, including our NHS and emergency service staff, carers, community volunteers, council staff and retail staff, who have done so much to keep us safe during this pandemic. Along with the monumental effort by the people of Wales, the UK Government have stepped up by providing unprecedented levels of support—an additional £5.85 billion for Wales—ensuring that we make it through this crisis as one United Kingdom.

Having grown up in a family hotel business in Wales and now acting as the Conservatives' small business ambassador for Wales, I speak to many Welsh companies that are struggling in the covid crisis, particularly in sectors such as hospitality and tourism. A common theme to their comments is the disorganised nature of the roll-out

[Simon Baynes]

of the Welsh Government's economic resilience fund, with many people unable to apply due to the IT system crashing, unclear guidelines on information required, and the application period closing in only a matter of hours without any prior warning. Some degree of administrative difficulty is understandable in the current crisis, but businesses feel extremely aggrieved when they hear that the Labour Welsh Government have still yet to spend £650 million of the money that they have received from the UK Government, which could be used to put right the problems caused by short-changing Welsh businesses in business support. This problem is further compounded by the unfairness of the Welsh Government's prioritisation of south Wales over mid-north Wales in their policy, financial support and investment. A clear example is that the average increase in the Welsh local government authority funding support in north Wales is below the national average, whereas in predominantly Labour-run south Wales, it is above the average. In my constituency, Wrexham Council received a Welsh Government grant increase of only 2.3%, which is the second lowest in Wales and compares with an average of 4.1% in south Wales.

While other parties like Labour and Plaid talk about process, power and breaking up the Union, I am proud that the Welsh Conservatives are focused on seeing off covid together as a United Kingdom that serves everyone in north, mid and south Wales on an equal footing.

4.10 pm

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Diolch yn fawr iawn, Mr Deputy Speaker. Prynawn da and I wish you a happy St David's Day debate.

I, too, send my condolences, and pay my respect to the late, great and lovely Professor Hywel Francis, who did so much for the Welsh Affairs Committee and the Human Rights Committee, and fought with me to get David Cameron to commit to the electrification of the railway to Swansea—a promise yet to be fulfilled. Gorau arf, arf dysg: the best weapon is the weapon of knowledge, as Hywel would say.

Hywel would be very pleased that the Welsh Government are leading the way in terms of vaccination, at 26% of the nation versus 24% in England. By 31 July, everyone will have been offered a vaccination. Already we see children in schools, with a gradual roll-out and in a responsible way—not the sort of big-bang approach we see in England. England has ended up with excess deaths over five years of something like 20% when it is just 13% in Wales, partly because of the success of our contact tracing system, which is wholly in the public sector. We have also seen in Wales what has happened where the UK Government are in charge at the DVLA. There were only hundreds of people at work in the last lockdown in March; there are now thousands, even after 555 covid cases. That is completely irresponsible at a time when BT has offered more kit to enable people to work from home. The Government are basically playing Russian roulette with the workers, who are forced to choose between going on strike or protecting their families. It is completely irresponsible and unnecessary.

The Welsh Government are building back better and building back stronger. Meanwhile, we get less than 2% for railway enhancements versus 5% in terms of our

population, which is completely unfair. I want to see investment in the Swansea Bay lagoon, but again there has been a U-turn by the Conservative Government on that. I want to see the commitment to the shared prosperity fund being spent where it is most needed and most productive, as was the case with the EU. We do not know what the Tory Government are going to do about that. Wales is also suffering from a bad Brexit because it was a late deal—a half-filled sack delivered by the Prime Minister at Christmas. There is a bit of chaos there that can hopefully be sorted out. Meanwhile, the Development Bank of Wales set up by the Welsh Government is doing well, alongside the £2 billion economic resilience fund that has already delivered 141,000 jobs. Apart from a greener, stronger Wales, we have a fairer Wales with the Welsh Labour Government—free school meals during holidays, no dodgy deals, and no homeless left on the streets, unlike England.

I urge people to vote Labour this year for the ambition of Wales, the health of Wales, justice in Wales, and a fairer, stronger Wales. Give us the tools and we will do the job. We have the Government who are capable of doing it.

4.13 pm

Craig Williams (Montgomeryshire) (Con): It is a great pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker, for this important debate. Although the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) brought us together on the rugby, I am afraid that the hon. Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) has divided the Chamber on many of the issues he mentioned—but it is still a privilege, of course, to follow him.

This St David's Day debate is of course set in the context of covid, but the covid crisis has brought our four nations together, and the vaccine programme is an exemplar of the strength of our Union. I very much welcome the figures from the Welsh Government and from the UK Government on securing the supplies that have made possible the pace and speed of the roll-out. I pay tribute to the frontline NHS, the Ministry of Defence, the volunteers in Montgomeryshire and Powys and the local health boards for delivering so much care and support throughout this covid pandemic. Let us look at the economic support that has been mobilised from this Parliament and this Government across the United Kingdom: 10% of workers were furloughed in Montgomeryshire, leaning on the support of the Union to get them through this crisis.

I pay particular tribute to the Powys Association of Voluntary Organisations and Carl Cooper, its chief executive. He rightly said before covid that Powys is the volunteering capital of Wales, and we see at the moment 60,000 volunteers out of a population of 120,000—half of our population in Powys and Montgomeryshire is mobilised, supporting people who need it.

During my short, three-minute contribution, I want to mention the pet projects I have been pushing as a Member of Parliament: the Llanymynech-Pant bypass, where there is a feasibility study at the moment; the Carno station, which we hope to see under the new stations fund; and, more importantly, the Montgomery canal, which we seek to reconnect to the UK network and which those volunteers are still delivering. That is happening right now. I will not say exactly how many

yards or metres they have delivered while I have been speaking, but those volunteers represent spades in the ground and it is great to see that continuing.

In closing, I wish to pay tribute to Robert Owen and acknowledge his 250th birthday. He is a great export from Montgomeryshire. He was born in Newtown in 1771, and we have a museum in the heart of my constituency's biggest town. I want to end with a quote. Robert Owen campaigned throughout his life

‘to promote the well-being and happiness of every man, woman and child without regard’—

to

“sect, party, country and colour”.

That is a nice way for me to end my contribution to the St David's Day debate.

4.16 pm

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab) [V]: People watching from Wales may well be reflecting on why this once-a-year debate is cut so short and not given more time and prominence. The message of St David, “Gwnewch y pethau bychain”—to do the small things—resonates strongly, now more than ever. In the past year, we have experienced great hardships and sadness, and we could not have got through the past year without all those who have looked after us. In Cardiff North, the Feed the Heath group have kept our hard-working NHS staff going and delivered to the shielding in places such as Thornhill, Lisvane and Pontprennau. I should mention all those who have provided emotional support and advice. The kindness and impact of their small actions has travelled much further than they will know. They show our common values.

Our friend and former colleague here Hywel Francis spoke of those. Hywel was a great supporter of Welsh democracy. He understood that democracy is served by a strong Parliament in Cardiff, not one that could be undermined at the stroke of a pen or the whim of a Minister in London, without a mandate or without a clue or care. That is what we are seeing today: the UK Government's attempt to control Wales's levelling-up fund, riding roughshod over devolution, pitting nations and regions against one another and airbrushing out the last 10 years of Tory failure. We see businesses knocked hard, and parents worried sick by the cut in universal credit, having to make choices between a bus fare and feeding their children.

However, our Welsh Labour Government here in Wales continue to provide the most generous support package to businesses and are fully funding free school meals right through to Easter 2022. We know that what we do here has a huge bearing even on the most distant communities. From Cardiff to Kampala, we see the same common values of decency, compassion and solidarity, and we must keep fighting to protect those values. Here in Wales, the first fair trade nation, where we have the first Parliament and Government to declare a climate emergency, and where we are giving 16 and 17-year-olds the right to vote and to shape their future, our Welsh Labour Government are leading, working to make the small things count. Gwnewch y pethau bychain.

4.19 pm

Fay Jones (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): The heavily pregnant sheep in the field next door to me are a reminder of the optimism that spring will soon bring to

Brecon and Radnorshire after a very long winter. The vaccine roll-out is also bringing huge optimism to many thousands of my constituents. As a volunteer at the mass vaccination site in Builth Wells, I have seen just how well progress is going, and I want to send my heartfelt thanks to all the vaccinators, volunteers and healthcare professionals in Powys.

Listening to some of the contributions this afternoon, it astounds me that Opposition Members are slow to recognise the UK Government's outstanding financial contribution to Wales of more than £6 billion during the coronavirus. But slow is top speed for the Drakeford Government. They have been slow to publish an exit plan and slow to take action where it is so desperately required.

There is no better example of that than the state of our rivers here in Brecon and Radnorshire. Two thirds of the River Wye, which flows through Radnorshire and into Herefordshire before sensibly returning to Wales, is failing environmental targets. It is even worse for the River Usk, which flows through Breconshire. Almost daily, I meet with local councils, campaigners and my hon. Friends in neighbouring constituencies in England to discuss how we can clean up the rivers, but on this, a wholly devolved issue, Brecon and Radnorshire's Member of the Senedd is missing in action. The inertia of the Welsh Government is harming tourism, agriculture and the natural environment. This needs heavyweight political intervention—something that we will never get from the Welsh Labour Government.

Next week, I will attend the St David's Day dinner at Brecon barracks. Sadly, this year's event will be on Zoom, but at least I will be spared the ignominy of the leek-eating ceremony that the Secretary of State for Wales and I had to endure last year. Brecon is a proud garrison town with a deep and historic military connection. I once again thank my ministerial colleagues for the announcement that the 160th (Welsh) Brigade will remain in Brecon. Although I am delighted with that news, they will know that I have not given up my campaign to keep the barracks in Brecon.

No focus group needs to advise Government Members to support and respect our military. It is ingrained in all of us, and once again I declare my interest, in that my partner is a serving soldier, but championing the armed forces is not just about preserving key facilities; it is about recognising the lifelong toll that service takes. Every nation in the United Kingdom has a veterans commissioner except for Wales. With key public services devolved to the Welsh Government, a veterans commissioner would ensure that Welsh veterans are never disadvantaged as a result of their military service.

Like you, Mr Deputy Speaker, I love my country, but I know that Wales could be so much more. A Conservative Government in the Welsh Parliament would offer real prosperity right across Wales, never again keeping Wales poor, sick and tired, as Welsh Labour has done for 21 long years.

4.21 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): Happy St David's Day to everyone for Monday, and congratulations to the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) on securing the debate.

[Wendy Chamberlain]

I pay tribute to my friend Kirsty Williams, who, after 22 years in the Senedd, is stepping down at the May elections. During that time, she has been a fantastic voice for her constituents as well as leading the Welsh Liberal Democrats for eight years, as the first female leader of a Welsh political party. Since 2016, she has served with distinction as Education Minister in the Welsh Government. During the pandemic, she ensured that Wales was the first of the four nations to commit to continuing the provision of free school meals during the summer holidays.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Lady and I are both committed Unionists. In relation to education, some of my constituents from Strangford are attending medical school in Cardiff. We should celebrate the education in this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—better together, as always.

Wendy Chamberlain: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. I absolutely agree that it is important that we work across the four nations, but one area that the Welsh Government have been focusing their attention on recently is the Erasmus scheme. Last year, we heard from the Prime Minister and others that UK membership of Erasmus was not under threat. Indeed, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster indicated that we would still be part of Erasmus as late as 17 December 2020; yet ultimately it did not feature in the deal with the EU, apparently on cost grounds.

That is a huge disappointment, and I know that the Welsh academics in universities to whom I have spoken are concerned that the Government's new Turing scheme is at risk of overpromising and, very likely, underdelivering. We are told that up to 35,000 students will take part in the first year of the programme, but funding for providers will be confirmed only in July, which leaves a very short window to get places finalised by September. At the heart of the new programme, we are told, is the Government's levelling-up agenda; yet the reality is that the Turing scheme does not cater for adult and youth groups, as Erasmus did.

When we add to that the likely additional costs to participants of visas, savings and income requirements, which the Foreign Office has said are for universities to navigate, as well as the loss to local economies of income from students attending UK institutions, I find it increasingly difficult to understand the Government's decision. The Welsh Government, like the Scottish Government, want to be able to opt in to the Erasmus scheme, and I think that we should do what we can in this place to facilitate that choice. I ask the Minister to set out what conversations he has had with the Welsh Government on that issue.

There are a number of areas where Wales faces challenges posed by our departure from the EU. Another is the impact on trade routes and ports. There has been a huge reduction. At Rosslare Europort in the Republic of Ireland, traffic to the UK halved last month while direct routes to the EU increased in popularity by nearly 500%. The Government might dismiss that as teething problems, but the general manager at Rosslare said that Wales should consider shutting one of its ports. Surely that must be concerning for all of us.

The rise in the number of direct ferry routes bypassing the land bridge route through Wales means that this is not going to go away. The Government need to engage on this issue now, because if they let it run on, it will cause damage to the Welsh economy and local communities. The foresight must also be applied as livestock comes into season and the agriculture industry looks to export to the EU later in the year. Can the Government offer assurances that farmers will not experience the same disruption that the fishing industry is currently facing?

I have talked about the challenges posed by Brexit, but I also want to touch on the challenges posed over the last year by the pandemic. It is incumbent on all of us to reflect on the enormous change to the political centre of gravity in Wales and elsewhere over the last year. None of us has ever experienced anything like the restrictions placed on our lives over the last year, and I very much hope that we will never have to endure them again. But for those of us in the devolved nations, there have been restrictions conceived and passed not in this place, but in Cardiff, Edinburgh and Belfast, and that is hugely significant. The whole driving force behind devolution is the idea that power is best utilised where it is closest to the people that it impacts upon, and that is a lesson that has been reinforced during the pandemic. That means not just between the four nations, but within them. That partnership built on consensus and common interest has to be the future of this Union and, as we approach Saint David's Day, I can think of no better time for all of us in this place to engage again with that approach.

4.26 pm

Dr Jamie Wallis (Bridgend) (Con) [V]: I am very pleased to have the opportunity today, ahead of Saint David's Day on Monday, to highlight some of the key areas where we have seen Wales's place in a strong United Kingdom being backed up by action from the UK Government.

I will start with the great British success story: vaccines. Seeing our world-beating vaccine roll-out to defeat covid-19 and protect lives is, I think, one of the most compelling reasons for Wales's place in our Union of nations. However, had Wales stayed in the European Medicines Agency, as UK and Welsh Labour had wanted, it would have received fewer vaccines. In 2018, when he was the Finance Minister, the First Minister said that the European Medicines Agency was "high" on his list of agencies of which he would like to see continued membership. Well, if we had stayed, Wales would have received 670,144 fewer vaccines.

There has also been confusion and frustration for many of my constituents this week. When the Prime Minister set out his clear and honest plan to unlock England's economy and society, many of my constituents in Bridgend were watching with keen interest, just to have this road map dismissed and to have the First Minister say, simply, that it does not apply to Wales. Although he is right to say that the rules on public health are within the Welsh Government's remit, surely a co-ordinated approach, and not being different for politics' sake, would have been a far more attractive offering for the people of Wales. There has been no clear plan, however, from the Welsh Labour Government about unlocking our economy and our society.

Another testament to this great Union of nations has been our armed forces, with the support coming from military personnel to assist with the vaccine roll-out in Wales. This has been thanks only to this one-nation UK Government, and the armed forces are a testament to the strength of our United Kingdom.

The announcement that the £4.8 billion levelling-up fund will be UK-wide, so that the UK Government can directly support communities in Bridgend, is yet another example. For decades, Welsh Labour has not delivered on regeneration in Bridgend and I am pleased that the UK Government will possibly be in a position to deliver on this much-needed investment.

The power that the Welsh Government have has never been more apparent. We can no longer take Welsh elections for granted and, at the upcoming election in May, the people of Wales have a choice: more of the same, or a Welsh Conservative Government that will work hand in hand with our UK Government to rebuild Wales and build back better.

4.29 pm

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC) [V]: Diolch yn fawr iawn i chi. I am very glad today to remember my colleague and friend Hywel Francis, whose passing impoverishes Wales and the radical cause everywhere. Cof da amdanat, Hywel.

This Government's blatant power grab of Welsh responsibilities returned from Brussels is very well known. Now we can see the levelling-up fund for what it really is—a money grab on the same unprincipled lines. It is the worst of both worlds: not enough to remedy the enormous concentration of wealth and power in the south-east of England; no match for the EU's long-term commitment to cohesion funding; and now in the hands of the very same London elite who created and worsened the regional inequality in England, and who have sidelined and impoverished Wales, the very poorest part of their United Kingdom.

Between 2014 and 2020, Wales received £2.7 billion in EU funding, equivalent to £375 million annually. Funding was allocated according to need and invested on the principle of subsidiarity—that those closest to the problem would know best how to tackle it. For this Government, though, the money is theirs to splash out as they wish, to old friends and new supplicants, as they know best. Wales has been stitched up, as businesses across our country are learning every day.

Every day it seems that new problems emerge from this Government's botched, last-minute Brexit deal, and the deal's chief supporters—the European Research Group, the Democratic Unionist party and others—all howl, "This is not what we wanted." Well, true enough. The port of Holyhead has lost 50% of its traffic since the end of the transition period. Welsh exporters face huge barriers to trade, mounting paperwork and long transit delays. Welsh pharmaceutical companies have been affected; one in particular has been forced to throw out hundreds of packs of vital cancer treatments because of the Government's Brexit red tape on exports, and it has since moved production from Wales—to where? To Ireland, of course. Welsh shellfish producers, such as those in my Arfon constituency, are also prevented from exporting to the largest and most important markets.

The lesson for Wales from this red, white and blue Brexit is clear: do not expect Westminster to seek our best interests. Control of our own affairs and speaking directly with our international partners is our way to prosperity, to expanding our opportunities and to opening our horizons. Our people are now seeking to grasp that opportunity in greater numbers than ever, particularly young people. Westminster has long since had its day. Only independence will enable us to reach our full potential.

4.32 pm

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con) [V]: Dydd Gŵyl Dewi hapus; happy St David's Day for Monday, and a special shout-out to my wonderful Welsh teacher.

Wales accounts for 5% of the UK's population, but produces only 3.4% of its wealth. My constituency of Anglesey has one of the lowest GVAs in Wales. Why is that, when in Môn Mam Cymru—Anglesey, the mother of Wales—we have such abundant natural resources? Anglesey has been neglected for many years and has become overly dependent on seasonal tourism. We were one of the first parts of the country to be hit by the economic effects of the pandemic, and we will be one of the last to recover. Indeed, if it was not for the intervention of the Chancellor, keeping businesses such as Catch 22 and Coffee Cups going, our local economy would have been decimated.

Our young people are forced to leave to seek work on the mainland due to the lack of good-quality jobs on the island. They tell me that what they really want is to stay here, buy a home, raise a family, share a daily paned with their friends, and keep their culture and language alive. Local businesses such as Holyhead Marine, Pentraeth Automotive and Holyhead Towing offer outstanding training and long-term jobs to local people, and the innovation jobs fair that I am holding at M-SParc will highlight our many science, technology, maths and engineering employers, but there simply are not enough quality jobs to go around.

This UK Government's commitment to making a success of Brexit, levelling up and delivering net zero by 2050 will enable Anglesey to capitalise on its resources and talent, and bring prosperity back to our island. Wylfa Newydd is still the best site in the UK for nuclear power, and I continue to work with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and local stakeholders to explore potential opportunities at the site.

I am working on a proposal to bring a freeport to Anglesey. The freeport bidding process for Wales should be led by the Welsh Government, but it is already months behind the English process. This means that if—as seems likely—freeports are created in England ahead of those in Wales, Anglesey will be further disadvantaged. This week the UK Government announced that they will manage the £4 billion levelling-up fund. It is great news for Anglesey. I will be fighting hard to take advantage of that fund for the island and address past inequalities.

I assure my constituents that, like St David raising the hill so the crowds could see him, I am working hard to raise Anglesey up as a shining beacon of new prosperity for all to see. Diolch yn fawr.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Diolch yn fawr. The wind-ups will begin at 4.42 pm.

4.34 pm

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab) [V]: I too want to begin by paying tribute to Professor Hywel Francis, who was a long-standing friend of my family. He made an invaluable contribution to Wales and the miners here in the valleys, and my condolences go to his family.

“Mae’n bleser i siarad heddiw ac i gael cyfle i ddweud tamaid bach yn fy mamiaith. Rwy’n caru Cymru—ein hiaith, ein diwylliant ac yn bennaf ein pobl.” [*Translation: It is a pleasure to speak today and to have the opportunity to say a little in my mother tongue. I love Wales—our language, our culture and above all our people.*] People make a country, and I am so proud to be Welsh and to share my national identity with so many wonderful people. That is why I am so angry and sad to see people in Wales suffering hardship and poverty. I read the statistics that show that my constituency has the third highest death rate from covid in the UK, and that one of the wards in my constituency has a rate of child poverty of 45%. Wages are low and jobs are insecure. We have high levels of digital exclusion and health inequality.

It is always the poorest in society who suffer the most. Successive Tory Governments’ austerity policies have undermined their ability to fight the pandemic, attacked the benefits system on which so many of my constituents depend, and stripped our Welsh Government and local authorities of much-needed funds, with £90 million of cuts in my local authority. At the same time, we have seen the resilience of local people in the way they have stood together. Local people here in Cynon Valley kept the museum going and fought to keep the children’s pool open. They are volunteering at the food banks and have formed a committee to stand up against projects that could damage our environment. They have set up a community hub and they are being good neighbours and friends.

No woman or man is an island. We all need each other, and that forms the basis of my philosophy and the philosophy of many of my forebears. Wales has a radical socialist tradition driven by that sense of community and togetherness, and it stretches from the Chartist movement to the “clear red water” statement of Rhodri Morgan. It continues in so many of the policies of our current Labour-led Welsh Government, with the maintenance of free prescriptions and the protection of the NHS as a publicly owned service. Work has been done on a social partnership Act, and in my constituency my economic advisory group is looking at how we can develop and support community wealth building.

The present UK Government are determined to ride roughshod over the devolution settlement and recentralise power in Westminster. My call today is for radical constitutional reform that puts the four nations of the UK on an equal footing, and that gives all the nations a fair funding arrangement based on the needs of the people. We need a new political and constitutional consensus aimed at delivering power, wealth and opportunity back into the hands of the people, and communities underpinned by the core values of democracy, fairness, climate stability and equality. I know from my home in Cynon Valley that people in Wales have the ability and the appetite to do things differently. They can see the way forward. They just need the tools, the financial support, the decision-making powers and the political determination to get there. “Mae gan bobl Cymru a phobl Cwm Cynon y gallu i greu

byd sy’n fwy gwyrdd, cymdeithas fwy cyfartal a dyfodol tecach i bawb.” [*Translation: The people of Wales and of Cynon Valley have the ability to create a greener world, a more equal society and a fairer future for all.*]

4.37 pm

Rob Roberts (Delyn) (Con): I recently asked some of my constituents for their thoughts on living in north Wales, and the vast majority of them told me just how lucky they felt. I could not agree with them more. North Wales has a rich culture and history, outstanding natural beauty and, most importantly, that close-knit sense of community that means it is a fantastic place to live, work and raise a family. However, while I wish it was all positive feedback, my constituents also told me that they feel altogether let down and ignored by the Welsh Labour Government and that Cardiff places far too much emphasis on south Wales, which often means that the people of the north feel like a forgotten afterthought.

There are still those who falsely claim that the reason the Welsh Government are failing the people of north Wales is underfunding from the UK Government, but we all know that that is not the case. It is just standard rhetoric. Just this morning, in fact, the Welsh Minister for Transport gave evidence to the Welsh Affairs Committee, and he was super-excited to mention the investment of around £750 million in the south Wales metro scheme, but when I asked why less than a tenth of that was being spent on the north Wales equivalent, he abdicated responsibility to a lack of investment from Westminster. So, when there is investment, it is down to the wonderful Welsh Government, but when they choose to spend their money in the south instead of the north, that is Westminster’s fault and nothing to do with them at all.

I think the people of north Wales are finally beginning to see through that, and beginning to recognise that they will never get a fair crack of the whip while the Welsh Government are run by a Labour party that is concerned only with appeasing its core voters in the south. At no point in the period of devolution has spending on health in Wales relative to England matched the levels of relative need. In England, spending on health has increased by 150% in that period, but in Wales it has increased by only 98%, so we will take no lectures from Opposition Members as to who is more committed to the welfare of the NHS.

Sadly, the theme of underfunding continues into education. The Welsh Local Government Association highlighted the scale of the pressure facing school budgets, and just today the Children’s Commissioner for Wales published a report on home education and independent schools, in which she concluded that there has been a “lack of progress” and that

“the Welsh Government has failed...to protect the rights of children”

in those areas.

Fortunately, this Conservative Government are committed to their levelling-up agenda and will make sure that every part of the UK benefits from it. I was delighted to see the announcement yesterday that the £4 billion levelling-up fund will be increased to almost £5 billion and will now include the UK Government investing directly in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland so that my constituents in north Wales will no longer be forgotten.

To conclude, as one of my constituents said to me, “The Welsh Government just needs to do better.” I say back to constituents that we all have an opportunity to change that in a couple of months’ time and to finally see a Welsh Government that works for everyone in our wonderful country.

4.40 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Diolch, Mr Deputy Speaker. One motto on one of the Welsh coats of arms is:

“Y ddraig goch ddyry cychwyn”.

That broadly translates as “The red dragon advances”, and the Welsh dragon is advancing—leading the way in vaccine delivery; investing in remarkable bioscience and high-tech innovation; driving a green revolution; producing TV, film and music that is shaping the world; through our Welsh regiments as part of our UK armed forces, keeping us safe at home and abroad and working on the covid vaccine delivery; and of course inspiring us on the rugby and football fields. We all salute Louis Rees-Zammit; what a remarkable set of tries.

That is the Wales that I believe in—Wales advancing, not the Wales recently depicted by one nationalist group, shamefully, as an abused partner, or, indeed, the one described by the leader of Plaid Cymru using comparisons with slavery, which he rightly apologised for. Nor is it the Wales described as “little status” by the Secretary of State, or the one described as “poor, sick and tired” by the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Fay Jones). That is not the Wales I know. The Wales I am proud of is a Wales that is advancing and a Wales that can do so much. That is the Wales that we celebrate on St David’s Day.

We in Welsh Labour support the Union, despite what the Chair of the Welsh Affairs Committee said; it is just that we do not support the policies of this Tory Government. We do not support their cutting universal credit; we do not support their leaving kids going hungry in the holidays, and we do not support their spending billions on contracts for Serco, delivering dividends to their supporters. There is a big difference—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I am sorry to cut you short—I do apologise, and I apologise to all the other Members who did not get in because of time constraints—but we have to go to the wind-ups. I call Nia Griffith.

4.42 pm

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I echo colleagues’ kind words about Dr Hywel Francis, a great socialist, historian, campaigner, internationalist and friend, and I extend my condolences to his family.

St David’s Day, coming in the springtime, is always a time of hope and celebration, but particularly so this year—and not just because we can begin to see an end to the pandemic thanks to the amazing work of our scientists and our NHS workers in rolling out the vaccine. This year has been a most extraordinarily difficulty year, and I express our enormous gratitude to all our key workers in Wales. I pay tribute to First Minister Mark Drakeford and the Welsh Government for their skill and commitment in handling the biggest health emergency in a century—keeping people safe, working

closely with local government to keep vital services running, providing the most generous support package for businesses anywhere in the UK, and, of course, protecting our NHS.

Our health service workers deserve a special thank you for the way that, in spite of the pressures, they have gone above and beyond to treat every patient with care and compassion. But of course our risk of catching the virus is not equal: poverty; poor diet; damp, cold, cramped living conditions, and greater workplace exposure all increase the risk. Inequalities are not new, but the pandemic has highlighted all too vividly the real life-and-death consequences of inequality, and in so doing it has shown how the principles on which we base our policies have a profound impact on outcomes.

We in the Labour party believe passionately in the principles of co-operation, respect, sharing wealth and working together for the greater good. The Welsh Labour Government’s determination to tackle inequalities means that in Wales we have seen support targeted at the most disadvantaged. In contrast with the Conservatives in England, Welsh Labour has retained the Flying Start scheme, retained the education maintenance allowance, guaranteed free school meals during the school holidays all this year and into next, and supported the most disadvantaged students. But let us not forget the appalling impact of 10 years of Conservative tax and austerity policies, with massive cuts to tax credits, which have led to a huge increase in in-work poverty and exacerbated inequalities.

For all its talk of levelling up, I do not think that the Conservative party really does understand, or wants to understand, what is really needed to tackle inequalities—both geographical and within our communities. Yes, we need infrastructure, but not fanciful ideas that never get delivered; we need immediate, practical measures to improve connectivity and productivity. We need real commitment from the UK Government to invest in our railways in Wales, in better broadband and in upgrading the national grid to harness our huge potential for renewables and drive the green transformation in Wales and beyond.

We also need investment in our communities to develop the skills and jobs for the future. That is why the Welsh Government have been working with local authorities to develop a framework for the shared prosperity fund. What is going on? Is it through pure incompetence or more sinister reasons that the Secretary of State and his Government have still not confirmed the full details of the SPF? All we have seen so far is a fraction of the amount of the EU finance that the fund is supposed to replace. What happened to “not a penny less”? Will the Secretary of State now commit to delivering the full equivalent of EU funding to Wales, to respecting the work that the Welsh Government have already done, and to working closely with them to get the best outcomes for the people of Wales? On the so-called levelling-up fund, will the Secretary of State also clarify how he intends to respect the devolution settlements and work with the Welsh Government to put those funds to most effective use?

I would like to touch a little more on respect for Wales and respect for the powers devolved to the Welsh Senedd. The past year has brought into people’s living rooms across the UK a snapshot of devolution as they see the four nations make decisions appropriate to their communities. They have been able to see the calm,

[Nia Griffith]

measured approach of Welsh Government Ministers determined to make the best decisions for the people of Wales after listening to the scientists and consulting with health boards, local government leaders, trade unions and business. Yet shockingly, the Welsh Conservatives have repeatedly voted against the coronavirus measures, which are designed to protect people and save lives.

We have seen the Welsh Government and local councils promoting better protection against covid in the workplace, while the UK Government have failed to ensure that managers at the DVLA respond promptly and effectively to concerns about covid security raised so often by MPs. We have also seen the contrast with the close collaboration between the Welsh Labour Government and our local councils, who know their communities and have a public service ethos, which has enabled the development of a really effective test and trace system. The Tories have given millions of pounds of public money to their cronies, whose private companies have neither local knowledge nor the ethos to deliver.

This year has also highlighted the Tories' lack of respect—indeed, their disdain—for consultation and co-operation with the devolved nations or with council leaders in England, as we saw when the Welsh Government approached the Chancellor about support for businesses in Wales for the proposed October firebreak, only to be ignored, as council leaders across the north of England had been before us.

Worse than that, with the UK Internal Market Bill we saw the Conservatives casting aside the productive work between the four nations on the common frameworks and preferring instead to ride roughshod over the devolution settlements, in what was nothing short of a power grab. That appalling behaviour is not only a betrayal of trust, but it fuels resentment. Now more than ever is a time when our energies at all levels of government must focus on recovering from the pandemic and building back better and greener. It is not a time for stirring up disunity or for indulging in the fantasies of independence, which bear no resemblance to the chaos that would ensue.

For Labour, the Union is strengthened when we value the strength of our common endeavour and foster a co-operative approach between the nations of the UK and a sharing of wealth according to need. We can achieve so much more when we work together to tackle the challenges of inequality, injustice and climate change at both UK and international levels.

I now turn to the issue of coal tip safety. Some 40% of the UK's remaining coal tips are in Wales; with our steep-sided valleys, we have a higher proportion of those that pose greater risk. With climate change and more violent weather patterns, we are seeing renewed threats. Fortunately, no lives were lost in last year's dramatic landslide at Tylorstown, but it is a salutary reminder of what can happen. The Welsh Government stepped in and worked with Rhondda Cynon Taf to deal with the immediate situation and set up the coal safety taskforce. But coal tips are clearly a legacy from pre-devolution days, so will the Secretary of State persuade his Government to join the Welsh Government and play their full role in providing funding to tackle coal tip safety, recognising the huge contribution made by Welsh mining communities to UK prosperity?

In conclusion, the pandemic has hit people in very unequal ways. As we look to foster economic recovery, people across Wales want us to work with compassion and determination to create a fairer, greener and more prosperous society. That is what the Welsh Labour Government are determined to do.

4.49 pm

The Secretary of State for Wales (Simon Hart): Mr Deputy Speaker, how appropriate it is to see one of Swansea's most famous sons in the Chair for today's debate.

I thank the hon. Members for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) and for Arfon (Hywel Williams), and of course my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb), for bringing the debate before the House. I also join many colleagues in paying tribute to Hywel Francis. Back in 2010, he was the first and, I suspect, the only Member from the Opposition Benches who came and welcomed me to the House, and he did so with great warmth and civility. I have never forgotten that moment.

The St David's Day debate last year was in a busy Chamber and guests from across Wales poured into No. 10. There was lots of positivity and good humour, but also some serious discussion of Wales's place in the world. Little did we know what lurked around the corner at that time or how Wales would rise to the challenge. This is a good opportunity to thank the thousands of people in every village, town and city, and in every shop, hospital, care home, church and council building across Wales for going way beyond the call of duty over the last few traumatic months. Sadly, I do not have time to recognise them all, but some were recognised in the new year honours list. All those who were honoured would probably say that they simply reflect the massive national effort in their local communities.

I hope that further down the line there will be a full-scale analysis of the last few months—a chance, perhaps, to lay to rest a host of conspiracy theories and to heap praise on those who have borne the greatest burden. It will help us show where devolution has worked—and it has worked, in parts—and, if we are honest, where it has not. It will show the role played by the Ministry of Defence, the vaccine programme, research and development, and financial support of the sort that we were able to put in place quickly and positively for Celsa in the constituency of the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), which rescued nearly 800 jobs.

Stephen Doughty *rose*—

Simon Hart: Sadly, time prevents me from taking an intervention.

The analysis will demonstrate, I hope, that the Union is about more than money; it is an historic bond that adds to the individual strengths of its component parts. I hope it will show, once and for all, that the choice is not whether we can be a patriot or a Unionist, but how we can effectively be both.

I hope, too, that history will record the value, in social as much as economic terms, of furlough, business interruption loans, universal credit support, VAT changes, kickstart and restart, tax holidays and, of course, the £6.6 billion of additional funding the UK Government have provided for our colleagues in Cardiff Bay. I hope it will also show that the UK Government have engaged more closely than ever with the devolved Administrations.

What better example is there than the vaccination programme, where there was proper teamwork between central and devolved Administrations to really positive effect? It will show that devolution can work and does work, but not when it is misused or—worse—hijacked by political ideologies.

What really matters now for all our constituents is what the future looks like and what our covid recovery plan consists of. For me, recovery is about optimism, commitment, resilience and investment—in other words, all the ingredients needed for jobs and livelihoods. It is also about levelling up, so that life chances in Blaenau Gwent are the same as those in Buckingham or Bath. That includes connectivity—roads, rail, digital—and yes, that does mean we will help the Labour party deliver its 2016 manifesto commitment to build an M4 relief road. It is about being serious about net zero and looking at it as an opportunity as well as an obligation—tidal, wind, nuclear, hydrogen—with a proper share in the 250,000 jobs that that ambition presents. It is about an economy that works well enough to fuel our public services, and that takes schools and hospitals in Wales from the bottom of the UK league tables to the top.

That is why we extended the levelling-up fund yesterday, taking the total to £4.8 billion of direct investment from the UK Government in projects across Wales. It is why the shared prosperity fund will mean that at least £375 million comes into Wales via the UK Government for the lifetime of this Parliament. It is why the UK Government will deliver a freeport in Wales—hopefully with Welsh Government support, if we can get it—and many other schemes. Yet somehow, we have heard speeches, particularly from separatists, who seem to want to turn this vision of optimism and investment into some kind of bad news story. I profoundly reject the Welsh Government's recent letter from Rebecca Evans, in which they claim that Cardiff Bay is “best placed” to make these choices, just as I do not believe that those of us in Westminster have a monopoly of wisdom, either. What does it actually say about the Welsh Government's attitude towards MPs across the House, local authorities, universities, businesses and others who are deeply embedded and sensitive to their local needs? Is that the respect that the hon. Member for Cardiff West mentioned at the beginning? It is not devolution either. True devolution is about involving all those people in the decision-making process. That is what we want to achieve. It is not just about Labour in the Bay or, indeed, us in SW1; it is about involving everybody.

A number of interesting points have been raised, and I would love to deal with all of them, but, sadly, time prevents that. It is revealing and to some extent a little depressing that of the 25 or so speeches we have heard this afternoon, a significant proportion were from Opposition Members who were laden with negativity and pessimism, talking down Wales's prospects and opportunities. It was depressing to hear. It is almost as if they look at their electoral chances in Wales in May as being dependent on a Wales that fails.

It was on a happier note that my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Fay Jones) made a very good point about the role of the armed forces. Unsurprisingly, they have been as professional in dealing with covid as they have in their other duties around the world, and it is a good opportunity just to mention very quickly one of Wales's three great regiments—the Queen's

Dragoon Guards, who are currently stationed in Poland with the NATO enhanced forward presence. She also made a very good point about the veterans' commissioner. I have been speaking to the Minister for Defence People and Veterans, and I am therefore delighted to announce that the UK Government are actively exploring ways to establish the first ever veterans' commissioner in Wales.

I will finish on this point. Every Member of this House, when they stand back from the politics, knows that in the end it is a small number of things that matter a lot to most of our constituents: our health, our jobs, our homes, our schools and our planet. Everything that the UK Government and the Wales Office believe in—our values and ambitions—is covered by those five elements. While the Welsh Government seem strangely to fixate on power and process, every decision we take and every judgment we make will be through the prism of jobs and livelihoods, investment and opportunity, and prosperity and growth, and that is the true choice that faces voters in Wales in about 70 days' time.

4.57 pm

Kevin Brennan [V]: I thank everybody who has participated in the debate today. I pay tribute to our friend and comrade Dr Hywel Francis. I hope that it will be a comfort to Mair and the family that so many of the Members who have spoken today wanted to pay fulsome tribute to Hywel in his memory and for his contribution to the House and outside. I also thank everyone who has contributed, but also express my sorrow for those who were not able to participate because of the lack of time for this debate, particularly the Members from Wales who missed out. My hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) might have had something to say to the Secretary of State on his closing remarks, had she had an opportunity to make her contribution. Others include the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards), my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), who of course is now the Member for the seat that Hywel Francis represented in the House for so many years—I am sure he would have wanted to pay fulsome tribute to Hywel as well—and my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), whose contribution, as always, would have been extremely important and passionate. My hon. Friends the Members for Newport West (Ruth Jones) and for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) would have made important contributions as well. It highlights the need for us to work towards trying to make the St David's Day debate a permanent fixture of the parliamentary calendar and to guarantee it sufficient time, so that those Members who wish to contribute—particularly those representing Welsh constituencies—can do so.

I will not revisit the arguments of the debate, but I join others who have wished good luck to the Welsh team against England on Saturday. At least that was one issue that united us all in today's debate, including perhaps even the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain), who contributed and I suspect might also have expressed support for the Welsh team on Saturday.

Finally, Dydd Gŵyl Dewi hapus.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Welsh affairs.

Business without Debate

SITTINGS IN WESTMINSTER HALL DURING THE PANDEMIC

Ordered,

The following provisions shall be made and have effect from 8 until 30 March:

(1) The Order of the House of 23 September (Sittings in Westminster Hall (Resumption)) is hereby rescinded.

(2) Sittings in Westminster Hall shall be held in a Committee Room designated for the purpose by the Chairman of Ways and Means.

(3) Members may participate in proceedings in Westminster Hall by electronic means under arrangements approved by the Chairman of Ways and Means, and such arrangements may include provision about the arrangement and timing of debates, including alteration of the times referred to in Standing Order No. 10 at which sittings are scheduled to begin or end.

(4) The Chair of a sitting in Westminster Hall may direct that a sitting be suspended to enable the necessary technical arrangements for virtual participation to be made or on public health grounds; the time taken for any such suspension shall be added to the period of three hours mentioned in paragraph (1) of Standing Order No. 10 in the same manner as a suspension under paragraph (3) of that Standing Order.

(5) The Chair of a sitting in Westminster Hall may limit the number of Members present at a sitting of the House in Westminster Hall at any one time.

(6) No sitting of the House in Westminster Hall shall take place on a day when a Public Bill Committee is expected to meet for the purpose of hearing oral evidence under the provisions of Standing Order No. 84A(3) in the Committee Room designated under paragraph (2) of this Order.—(*Mike Freer.*)

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it possible to put on the record the support and solidarity of the Scottish National party and the people of Scotland with the people of Wales? I wanted to take the opportunity that is normally afforded to us in the St David's Day debate to say that, because my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson) was keen to do so, but it did not quite arise. That did mean, however, that a couple of other Welsh colleagues were able to speak. I just wanted to assure the House, and anyone from Wales who is paying attention, of that continued solidarity and to wish them all the best for their national day.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): You have done that supremely well. *Dydd Gŵyl Dewi hapus i chi gyd*—happy St David's Day to you all.

Along with all other Members, I too pass on my deepest condolences on behalf of Mr Speaker and all the friends of Dr Hywel Francis here in Parliament to his family. As the Secretary of State for Wales said, Hywel was one of those Members who, irrespective of party divide, would reach out and become a friend. He was instrumental—pushing, as he did—in me getting an honorary degree from Swansea University, for which I will be eternally grateful. He reached out to me, a Conservative. That was the mark of Hywel Francis, and I send our condolences to his family once again.

Alcohol Duty

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Mike Freer.*)

5.2 pm

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con) [V]: I am grateful for the opportunity to debate today how we deliver a competitive duty system for alcohol producers. It will not surprise Members to know that my central interest here is in supporting Scotland's national drink. Moray is home to more than 50 Scotch whisky distilleries. However, many other Members from across the United Kingdom will in the weeks and months ahead be making calls of support to the Treasury team for producers of other drinks. Indeed, my constituency also has several small craft breweries that will be keeping a close eye on any proposed changes in the UK alcohol duty system, and I will come to some of their concerns later.

Since I was first elected in 2017, all my Scottish Conservative colleagues and I have continually worked with partners from the whisky and wider spirits industry in Scotland to secure substantial wins for the sector. In every Budget since my election, the UK Treasury has taken the decision to freeze the duty on spirits. That has been very much welcomed and illustrates the major show of support from successive Conservative Governments for this vital sector.

However, it is still the case that just under £3 in every £4 spent on the average bottle of whisky is taken as tax. That is among the highest tax rates on an alcoholic beverage in the world and is higher than the tax paid on wine, beer, and cider. In fact, a unit of alcohol served as Scotch whisky or gin is taxed 16% more than wine, 51% more than beer and 256% more than cider. That is why I was pleased when the Conservative party committed in its 2019 manifesto to

“review alcohol duty to ensure that our tax system is supporting British drink producers.”

Indeed, I well remember the Prime Minister's visit to Diageo's Roseisle distillery, less than a mile from where I am speaking today, to make that announcement as I joined him on the campaign trail for the 2019 general election.

I welcome the fact that the Government are currently taking that review forward, as promised. This is even more important in the context of the UK's departure from the European Union. We now have the opportunity to think differently about how we tax alcohol in this country. This is an opportunity, which the Government have to seize, to redress the many historical injustices in the alcohol duty system and use it not simply to raise revenue but as a tool to back our domestic producers with a solid foundation in the home market as they look to expand to new markets around the world.

The Scotch whisky sector employs 11,000 people in Scotland and supports more than 40,000 jobs across the United Kingdom, contributing £5.5 billion to our economy in the process. Much of that employment is in rural areas such as my constituency, Moray, where distilleries are a key local employer. It is a sector of significance and tradition, with a long history. However, it is also a sector that is facing real challenges right now, some of which are unique to the alcohol industry, while others are symptoms of the times we live in.

The covid pandemic and the resulting restrictions imposed on our day-to-day lives have affected all parts of the economy. We all know that these restrictions were necessary to curb the spread of the virus, but we must also acknowledge the economic damage that has been done as a result. The whisky and wider drinks sector has lost tourism income because of the travel restrictions in many parts of Scotland that we have now faced for more than 11 months. It has also lost many of its business customers due to the closure of pubs and restaurants for long periods both here in Scotland, since the whole of mainland Scotland went into lockdown again on Boxing day, and across the rest of the United Kingdom.

At the same time, for much of the last year those in the sector have been unable to access Scottish Government grant funding because they were not directly affected by the restrictions under the strategic framework. That would have meant that distilleries could open as tourism visitor attractions, even though most people in Scotland—not to mention international visitors and those from elsewhere in the United Kingdom—would have been unable to travel to those visitor centres. The impact that this has on the local economy here in Moray and other parts of the country cannot be overestimated. Tens of thousands of visitors come to Moray every year to follow the Speyside whisky trail or go on individual tours of distilleries. All those visitors spend more money elsewhere in the local economy—on accommodation, on food and in our local shops.

The Scotch whisky sector is also struggling with the impact of the 25% tariff introduced by the United States in October 2019. The industry has estimated that this has resulted in a cut in exports worth £500 million. As the Scotch Whisky Association has pointed out, this is a 35% drop in exports to the United States that is being borne by producers both large and small. For a sector with a trading history of more than 150 years, this is damaging an essential part of its business and trade with its biggest market. The Scotch whisky sector is in no way involved in the dispute between Airbus and Boeing, but it is paying the price for it, alongside a range of other iconic products, some of which are sadly based here in Moray as well, so we are really feeling the impact. This is clearly unfair and a source of great distress for the sector.

I am grateful for the efforts of the Secretary of State for International Trade over the last few months and years to get these tariffs removed. It is no easy task, but I believe that with the support of her Cabinet colleagues, she will prevail. In the meantime, I urge the UK Government to do all they can to deliver clear support for the sector, both in the short term, through next week's Budget, and in the longer term, to build a solid foundation through duty review.

I would also like to take some time to acknowledge the contribution made by spirits other than whisky. Scotland has a long and rich history of gin distilling, and Scottish gin has seen an enormous level of growth over the past decade. Twenty years ago, we would only have found two Scottish gin distilleries, but in 2020, there were more than 60 across the country. With many gin producers making more than one type of gin, the number of Scottish gin brands is believed to have climbed to around 140. Like whisky, 70% of the price of a bottle of gin is currently collected in tax. By comparison, less than €1 is claimed in duty on a bottle of wine in France. This takes us back to the central point of my contribution.

We have a huge opportunity to look at how we put duty on alcohol differently in this country and to introduce a fairer system for producers in Scotland and other parts of the United Kingdom.

As I mentioned earlier, while my focus is on whisky, other Members will no doubt be making the case to the Minister for changes to the taxation of other drinks, including cider and beer. Despite the dominance of whisky distilleries here in Moray, there are craft brewing firms that are also making a significant impact, with businesses such as the Lossiemouth-based Windswept Brewing Co. It is one of 60 independent craft brewers in Scotland that are also making a huge contribution to our UK alcohol receipts.

Ahead of this debate I was contacted by Nigel Tiddy from Windswept, and the work that those there have done to build up that business has been so encouraging. Seeing them continuing through this pandemic, I want to ensure that we continue to support companies such as Windswept and other craft brewers throughout this country as we come out of this pandemic. I know that they are watching this debate and this review very closely, and I will continue to engage with them after today's debate.

This is another fast-growing sector of our economy that has faced major challenges over the last 11 months. We all want to see the existing growth in the craft brewing industry continue. I know that such businesses and their trade body, the Society of Independent Brewers, are calling for changes to small brewers relief and support the pubs and taprooms that these companies rely on for most of their sales. They are also calling for recognition by Government of the role of smaller producers and the challenges they face in growing their businesses.

As I have already said about the argument for changes to the spirit taxes, there is an opportunity to review the entire system of alcohol taxation. The Treasury said at the time of its call for evidence in September 2020 that the current alcohol tax structures are “complex—and arguably outdated”, and I agree. We can reform these structures and develop a system that is fairer and, importantly, encourages the growth we want to see in these vital sectors of our economy.

To close, my message is that it is time to right the historical wrong in our tax system. It is time to see Scotch whisky taxed properly, not to see it continue to be more heavily taxed in its home country than imported wine. It is time that we backed Scotch whisky with a tax system that supports home producers in their own market. I have met the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury on this matter, and I know her interest in the subject.

I hope that, in responding to the debate, the Minister is able to outline where we have got to with the review, the timescale for it and what more the UK Government need from stakeholders as the overhaul of this system progresses. There is a need to set out a clear timetable to complete the current review of alcohol duty, and this should deliver a pathway to reform that better serves consumers and enables growth that will benefit our whole economy.

I was proud to campaign on this much-needed reform at the last election, just as I have been proud to stand up for Moray's huge array of Scotch whisky distilleries and other producers at every opportunity since I became the MP for this seat in 2017, but now words and promises must be turned into action. A duty review is long overdue,

[*Douglas Ross*]

and I look forward to working with the UK Government to deliver our manifesto commitment on this. I think we can all agree that if we do that, it is something we can raise a glass to.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I did not suspend the House after the Welsh affairs debate because both contributors to this Adjournment debate are coming via video link, but we have sanitised the Dispatch Box in the unlikely event that the video link goes down and we need to use it.

5.13 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen) [V]: May I start my response by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (*Douglas Ross*) on securing this debate, particularly since his constituency of Moray lays claim to hosting the largest number of distilleries in any United Kingdom constituency? He has indeed been a tireless advocate for the interests of Scotland. From lobbying for the removal of US tariffs to ensuring officials press on with the alcohol duty review, he has continually supported the Scottish alcohol industry, and he is absolutely right to do so. Distillers such as those in Moray are not just a source of refreshment; they are part of our heritage, they are significant tourism attractions in their own right, and they are important employers up and down the country. In 2019, the number of visitors to the Speyside whisky trail surpassed 2 million. That is a reflection of the sector's remarkable growth, which my hon. Friend mentioned, and the innovation that it has seen in recent years. I am confident that, post pandemic, the sector will continue to flourish, attracting millions more visitors each year. Distillers, like so many other businesses, have had a very challenging year, and as hon. Members will know, the Government have acted decisively to help them, just as we have acted decisively to help thousands of other businesses across other sectors.

Today, though, we are debating the future of the UK's alcohol duty system—a system that in fact has a long and fascinating history. Dating back to 1643, it was first introduced by Parliament as a way of financing its fight in the English civil war. Over time, the UK alcohol duty system evolved to become an important provider of Government revenue, and that is very much still the case. As my hon. Friend noted, the sector has experienced an impressive period of growth, helping to generate billions of pounds for the UK Exchequer. Each year the UK's alcohol duty system raises over £12 billion, helping to fund public services such as the NHS. In that way it helps to address the harm caused to society and public health by excessive or irresponsible drinking.

Those benefits, though, are balanced by the Government's pragmatic, reasonable approach to the level of duty applied. The Government have cut or frozen duty at seven of the last eight Budgets. In fact, the price of a typical bottle of Scotch whisky is £1.79 lower than it would have been, since we ended the spirits duty escalator seven years ago, in 2014.

As hon. Members may be aware, the current UK duty system is comprised of four distinct categories—beer duty, cider duty, spirits duty and wine duty. That means that the tax applied to each unit of alcohol varies according to whether the alcohol used to produce it came from malt, grapes or apples. That inconsistency

was, in part, a consequence of EU directives. Now that the United Kingdom has left the European Union, the Government have the opportunity to take a fresh look at the alcohol duty system to see whether we can create a system that is simpler, more consistent and less administratively burdensome to producers, and does a better job of protecting public health. I know that many of our constituents agree that there is need for reform.

My hon. Friend has once again eloquently voiced his concerns, urging the Government to create a system that works in the best interests of business, his constituents and the industry as a whole. As he noted, at Budget 2020 the Chancellor announced that the Government would review the alcohol duty system. That, of course, was a commitment made in our manifesto, which, as my hon. Friend said, was announced when the Prime Minister visited the distillery in his constituency at Roseisle during, I think, the election campaign, and this review came about only because of the campaigning efforts of my hon. Friend and other Scottish Conservatives to raise the need for reform. The review has come about in part because the Treasury recognises that the alcohol drinks industry is innovative and entrepreneurial, and that traditional assumptions may no longer hold. I was heartened to hear in his speech that Scotland is turning its distilling expertise to gin, with explosive growth in the number of Scottish gin brands.

Since that announcement at the 2020 Budget, my officials and my hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary have engaged with stakeholders across the industry, as well as with public health officials and tax experts. Our goal has been to assess how well the alcohol duty system works now and how it could work better in future. A call for evidence launched in October 2020 asked a series of key questions such as: overall, how well do the different duties work when combined together as a system? Is there a case to move to a standard method of taxation? Would a more consistent systemic approach to indexing alcohol duties be of benefit? Could we reduce burdens by standardising the way businesses declare and pay their duty?

I am pleased to say that we received more than 100 submissions expressing, as one might expect, a wide range of views, which we—my officials and my hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary—are now analysing. We will provide further updates from the review in due course, as quickly as we can. I would like to assure my hon. Friend that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor and my hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary are taking a very close interest in this issue and the detailed analysis and work that has been undertaken and are keen to make the most swift progress possible.

Since my hon. Friend the Member for Moray has also raised the issue of small brewers relief, I should add that the Government are running a separate technical consultation specifically on this issue. That closes on 4 April. I encourage any craft breweries based in his constituency or in Scotland to make their views heard by responding to this consultation. The Chancellor will set out plans for the coming year at the Budget next Wednesday, and hon. Members will understand that it would be inappropriate for me to comment in any more detail at this stage. I note that my hon. Friend has also rightly raised concerns about the 25% US tariffs on Scotch whisky, and I agree entirely with his assessment that the continued application of these tariffs is particularly

disappointing and unfair, given that they have nothing to do with the Scotch whisky industry. To be clear, the UK has negotiated intensively with the US and the EU on these disputes and remains committed to reaching a fair and balanced settlement. I share my hon. Friend's desire to help struggling producers and reach a settlement that works for the UK as a whole.

To sum up, Mr Deputy Speaker, the UK's alcohol duty system makes an important contribution to funding vital public services and addressing alcohol-related harms. However, as my hon. Friend has compellingly explained, once again the current system is in need of reform. Leaving the EU provides an invaluable historic opportunity to undertake that reform, and our guiding intention is to do what we can to support this country's historic and vibrant drinks industry for the long term. By challenging and tackling existing anomalies and reducing inconsistencies that distort the market, our hope is to support innovation and growth within the industry and thereby give the sector the future that it deserves.

I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution today. I know that he will be a little bit frustrated that I cannot set out a clearer timetable, but he certainly can know that the Government are fully committed to addressing the issue and will urgently respond to the challenge that he has set us.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): At the end of this week I thank everybody at the broadcasting unit, the technicians and their teams for working supremely well to ensure that the vast majority of Members were able to make their contributions remotely, thereby making this Parliament much safer for those who have to work here.

Question put and agreed to.

5.24 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 25 February 2021

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Myanmar

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs and First Secretary of State (Dominic Raab): The UK condemns the coup in Myanmar in the strongest possible terms and we stand with the people of Myanmar who were clear at the elections in November that they want a democratic future.

Since 1 February the UK has led a strong, co-ordinated international response to support the Myanmar people and put pressure on the military.

We have led statements by G7 Foreign Ministers on 3 February and 23 February: convened an urgent meeting of the UN Security Council and co-ordinated a statement from all members condemning the coup on 4 February and co-led a special Session of the Human Rights Council on 12 February.

Last week, alongside our Canadian counterparts, we also announced sanctions on three individuals responsible for serious human rights violations committed by the military and police.

Today I am announcing further measures to increase the pressure on the Myanmar military following the coup.

First, the UK will impose sanctions on six military members of Myanmar's State Administration Council for their role in overseeing human rights violations. This includes the Commander-in-Chief, General Min Aung Hlaing, Secretary of the SAC, Lieutenant General Aung Lin Dwe, Joint Secretary of the SAC, Lieutenant General Ye Win Oo, General Tin Aung San, General Maung Maung Kyaw, and Lieutenant General Moe Myint Tun. The measures prevent these individuals from travelling to the United Kingdom and freeze any assets held in this country.

Secondly, the UK will temporarily suspend all trade promotion in Myanmar and launch a strategic review of the UK's trade and investment approach. We are clear that UK businesses should not be supporting the military or their businesses. The joint FCDO-DIT review will look at identifying sectors with limited exposure to the military, opportunities for responsible development and mitigating the risk to Myanmar's poorest.

Thirdly, I can confirm that following a review of all UK aid in Myanmar, the UK has suspended all support involving the Myanmar Government directly or indirectly unless there are exceptional humanitarian reasons. Support for Government-led reforms has been stopped and planned programmes will close. Our remaining programmes will focus on reaching the poorest and most vulnerable in Myanmar.

The international community has sent a clear message to Myanmar. The military must hand back power to the democratically elected Government and release all those detained arbitrarily.

[HCWS802]

CABINET OFFICE

Withdrawal Agreement Joint Committee Meeting: 24 February 2021

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): The European Union and the United Kingdom held the first meeting of the Withdrawal Agreement Joint Committee following the end of the transition period on 24 February.

The parties welcomed the progress made on citizens' rights in recent weeks in implementing the rights of UK nationals in the EU and EU citizens in the UK under the withdrawal agreement, and reiterated the importance of communication and support to the most vulnerable.

Further to the meeting of the Joint Committee co-chairs on 11 February 2021, the EU and the UK also took stock of the implementation of the protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland and of work to find pragmatic solutions. The parties acknowledged the importance of joint action to make the protocol work for the benefit of everyone in Northern Ireland. In that spirit, the EU and UK reiterated their full commitment to the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement in all its dimensions, and to the proper implementation of the protocol. Building on the recent outreach by the Joint Committee co-chairs, there would be further joint engagement with business groups and other stakeholders in Northern Ireland. The UK and the EU underlined their shared commitment to giving effect to those solutions agreed through the Joint Committee on 17 December 2020, without delay. The UK noted that it would provide a new operational plan with respect to supermarkets and their suppliers, alongside additional investment in digital solutions for traders in accordance with the protocol.

Noting the need for ongoing engagement and the shared desire to act at pace, the UK and EU agreed that a further Joint Committee would be held to provide further steers and where appropriate approvals, and would liaise on timings.

[HCWS806]

ATTORNEY GENERAL

Reconsidering a Prosecution Decision: Revised CPS Guidance

The Attorney General (Suella Braverman): The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) has today published revised guidance to prosecutors on when they may institute or reinstitute criminal proceedings after a decision not to prosecute or to terminate proceedings has been communicated to a suspect or defendant.

The guidance sets out the framework for when this is possible as a matter of law and the governing principles that apply to the CPS decision. Victims of crime and the public have a legitimate expectation that those who commit offences will be brought to justice. Where it is legally possible to do so, and the evidential and public interest test provided for in the code for Crown Prosecutors is met, there are two important protections for the suspect, to ensure that there is no injustice done: first, the right of a defendant to revive proceedings in the magistrates' court, under section 23(7) of the Prosecution of Offences Act 1985; secondly, the court's power to stay any proceedings which amount to an abuse of the court's process.

The guidance also provides a non-exhaustive list of eight examples to illustrate the types of situations where cases are discontinued and later reinstated. They include where a further review shows that the original decision was wrong, when further evidence is anticipated in the near future, where significant evidence is later discovered, when a case is reviewed further in light of the findings of an inquest and where there are outstanding lines of inquiry to be completed or relevant material to be obtained. The guidance clarifies the procedure to be adopted and establishes the level of seniority at which any decision must be made. The fundamental evidential and public interest considerations have not changed.

A copy of the revised guidance has been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS808]

TREASURY

Finance Bill 2021

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman): The Finance Bill will be published on 11 March. Explanatory notes on the Bill will be available in the Vote Office and the Printed Paper Office and placed in the Libraries of both Houses on that day. Copies of the explanatory notes will also be available on gov.uk.

As usual, a full copy of the Budget resolutions will be made available after the Chancellor's Budget statement on 3 March. This includes resolutions made under the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968 for those measures that are expected to come into effect ahead of Finance Bill Royal Assent.

In line with the approach to tax policy making set out in the Government's documents, "Tax Policy Making: a new approach", published in 2010, and "The new Budget timetable and the tax policy making process", published in 2017, the Government published draft legislation for Finance Bill 2021 on 21 July 2020 and 12 November 2020, which is available on gov.uk. The Government remain committed to legislating those measures published in July and November 2020, subject to confirmation at Budget in the usual way.

[HCWS799]

DEFENCE

War Pensions Scheme Up-rating 2021

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans (Johnny Mercer): The new rates of war pensions and allowances proposed from 12 April 2021 are set out in the tables below. The annual up-rating of war pensions and allowances for 2021 will take place from the week beginning 12 April. Rates for 2021 are increasing by 0.5% in line with the September 2020 consumer price index.

<i>War Pensions Rates</i>		
	<i>Rates</i>	<i>Rates</i>
	2020	2021
(Weekly rates unless otherwise shown)	£	£
<i>War Pensions</i>		
<i>Disablement Pension (100% rates)</i>		
Officer (per annum)	10,071.00	10,123.00
Other ranks (weekly amount)	193.00	194.00

<i>War Pensions Rates</i>		
	<i>Rates</i>	<i>Rates</i>
	2020	2021
(Weekly rates unless otherwise shown)	£	£
<i>(Weekly rates unless otherwise shown) Age allowances payable from age 65</i>		
40%-50%	12.90	12.95
over 50% but not over 70%	19.90	20.00
Over 70% but not over 90%	28.25	28.40
Over 90%	39.80	40.00
<i>Disablement gratuity (one off payment)</i>		
Specified minor injury (min)	1,230.00	1,236.00
Specified minor injury (max)	9,181.00	9,227.00
1 – 5% gratuity	3,070.00	3,085.00
6 – 14% gratuity	6,825.00	6,859.00
15 – 19% gratuity	11,937.00	11,997.00
<i>Supplementary Allowances</i>		
<i>Unemployability allowance</i>		
Personal	119.30	119.90
Adult dependency increase	66.30	66.65
Increase for first child	15.40	15.50
Increase for subsequent children	18.10	18.20
<i>Invalidity allowance</i>		
Higher rate	23.60	23.70
Middle rate	15.40	15.50
Lower rate	7.70	7.75
<i>Constant attendance allowance</i>		
Exceptional rate	145.60	146.40
Intermediate rate	109.20	109.80
Full day rate	72.80	73.20
Part-day rate	36.40	36.60
<i>Comforts allowance</i>		
Higher rate	31.30	31.50
Lower rate	15.65	15.75
Mobility supplement	69.50	69.85
Allowance for lowered standard of occupation (maximum)	72.80	73.16
Therapeutic earnings limit (annual rate)	7,280.00	7,436.00
Exceptional severe disablement allowance	72.80	73.20
Severe disablement occupational allowance	36.40	36.60
Clothing allowance (per annum)	249.00	250.00
Education allowance (per annum) (maximum)	120.00	120.00
<i>WIDOW(ER)S BENEFITS</i>		
Widow(er)s'—other ranks (basic with children) (weekly amount)	146.40	147.15
Widower(er)s'—Officer higher rate both wars (basic with children) (per annum)	7,786.00	7,825.00
Childless widow(er)s' U-40 (other ranks) (weekly amount)	35.07	35.25
Widow(er) – Officer lower rate both wars (per annum)	2,704.00	2,718.00
Supplementary pension	97.95	98.44
<i>Age allowance</i>		
(a) Age 65 to 69	16.70	16.80
(b) age 70 to 79	32.10	32.25
(c) age 80 and over	47.60	47.85
<i>Children's allowance</i>		
Increase for the first child	23.00	23.10

War Pensions Rates

	<i>Rates</i>	<i>Rates</i>
	2020	2021
(Weekly rates unless otherwise shown)	£	£
Increase for subsequent children	25.55	25.70
<i>Orphan's pension</i>		
Increase for first child	26.30	26.45
Increase for subsequent children	28.75	28.90
Unmarried dependent living as spouse (maximum)	144.05	144.80
Rent allowance (maximum)	55.10	55.40
Adult orphan's pension (maximum)	112.55	113.10

[HCWS798]

EDUCATION**Schools Capital Funding**

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): Today, I am announcing £489 million of capital funding to support local authorities to create new school places needed for September 2023. This investment will support the Government priority to ensure that every child has the opportunity of a place at a good school, whatever their background.

The funding announced today is on top of our commitment to invest £23 billion in the school estate between 2016 and 2021, and the £750 million to create places needed by September 2022 that we announced last year. These funding allocations will allow local authorities to plan ahead with confidence, and to invest strategically to ensure they deliver good school places for every child who needs one.

Full details of this announcement, including allocations broken down by local authority, will be published on the Department for Education section on the gov.uk website here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/basic-need-allocations>.

[HCWS801]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE**International Recruitment of Health and Social Care Personnel: Code of Practice**

The Minister for Care (Helen Whately): I am announcing today the publication of the revised code of practice for the international recruitment of health and social care personnel.

The new code represents an important step forward in the UK's approach to ethical international recruitment. It takes account of the latest World Health Organisation advice on ethical international recruitment and promotes effective, fair and ethical international recruitment practices, which should be embedded across every part of the health and social care systems. This is an important step as the Government's manifesto commitment for 50,000 more nurses by 2024 will see a significant increase in the number of nurses who will come from overseas alongside the growth in UK-trained nurses.

The code represents part of the UK's contribution to international health worker mobility that offers benefits to migrants, their country of origin and to the UK.

With a projected 18 million more health workers needed to achieve universal health coverage in low and lower-middle income countries, the code sets out the UK's approach to supporting international health and social care systems, alongside safeguards on active recruitment of staff from countries with the most pressing health and social care workforce needs.

The code clearly sets out responsibilities for recruiters, employers and the Government on how to maintain ethical recruitment on an ongoing basis.

[HCWS800]

Safety of UK Plasma for Fractionation to Make Immunoglobulins: Revised Advice

The Minister for Care (Helen Whately): I would like to inform the House that the Government have decided to allow the use of UK sourced plasma for the manufacture of immunoglobulins.

In the wake of the bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) epidemic in the 1990s, a number of extra precautionary safety measures were introduced to protect patients from exposure to blood products that may increase their risk of developing Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (vCJD). This included the advice in 1998 of the then Committee on Safety of Medicines, that no UK plasma should be supplied for the manufacture of fractionated plasma-derived medicinal products. This has meant that over 250,000 litres of plasma are incinerated or not used for patient care each year.

Over the last 15 years, accrued scientific evidence has indicated that the risk of vCJD through the transfusion of UK plasma is much lower than initially thought; there have been no known transfusion transmissions of vCJD from any blood components since 1999. The Advisory Committee on the Safety of Blood, Tissues and Organs (SaBTO) evaluated the risk of transmission of vCJD and recommended that the current risk reduction measures be withdrawn.

In 2020, the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) undertook a comprehensive review of the safety of UK plasma to make immunoglobulins. The Commission on Human Medicines (CHM) considered the evidence and recommended that UK-sourced plasma can be used for the manufacture of immunoglobulins subject to several risk-mitigation measures.

The CHM's recommendation is available online at:

<https://app.box.com/s/jv487awvqzsrq10o34h9gg350ceyd4/folder/109651850203>

Upon receiving this expert advice, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has approved these recommendations, as have the Ministers in the devolved nations. This means that for the first time in over 20 years, UK plasma can again be fractionated to increase the availability of immunoglobulin medicines for the benefit of NHS patients in the UK.

This also means that convalescent plasma could potentially be fractionated and used, as part of a clinical trial, to produce hyperimmune globulin as a potential treatment for covid-19 patients.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has directed NHS England and NHS Improvement, NHS Blood and Transplant (NHSBT) and the MHRA to begin preparations to appoint a fractionator(s) through a competitive process. The aim is to secure a domestic supply of immunoglobulins, starting with circa 250,000 litres of plasma that NHSBT is already collecting and not using for transfusion. We expect the first UK-sourced immunoglobulin product to be available for NHS patients in 2022.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has also directed the MHRA to introduce a condition in new and existing authorisations granted to blood establishments, that plasma collected in the UK (including convalescent plasma) should be used for the benefit of UK patients, at least until domestic demand is met.

The Welsh and Scottish Governments and the Northern Ireland Executive have also directed their respective blood services to take forward work on this.

[HCWS797]

JUSTICE

Judicial Pensions

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Robert Buckland): I am today publishing the Government response to two consultation documents on judicial pensions which my Department launched, and which I presented to this House, on 16 July 2020:

- (i) in “Judicial pensions: proposed response to McCloud” we outlined our proposals for addressing the unlawful age discrimination identified in the McCloud litigation in respect of the 2015 reforms of the judicial pension scheme; and
- (ii) in “Proposals for a reformed judicial pension scheme” we set out our plans for reforming the judicial pension scheme with the aim of addressing the serious problems of judicial recruitment and retention that had been identified by the Senior Salaries Review Body.

Both consultations closed to responses on 16 October 2020, and we have taken the time to give very careful thought to the responses we received. We are currently finalising our response to a further consultation on the judicial mandatory retirement age, which we will be publishing in due course.

Addressing the discrimination identified in the McCloud litigation

In our consultation on the McCloud litigation, we sought views on both the scope and shape of our proposals for addressing the discrimination identified in the case, in which it was held that the 2015 judicial pension reforms unlawfully discriminated against younger judges.

In the light of the responses we received, the Government response to the consultation confirms that, subject to parliamentary time and approval of the necessary legislation, the Ministry of Justice will run an options exercise in 2022 for non-claimant judges in scope of McCloud. This will enable eligible judges to choose, retrospectively, whether to have accrued benefits in the 2015 pension scheme or the legacy scheme from 1 April 2015. Membership of the chosen scheme will end when the reformed judicial pension scheme comes into effect, following which all judges will join the new pension scheme.

The response document is available online at:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/consultation-on-the-proposed-response-to-mccloud>
Reforming the judicial pension scheme

The majority of responses we received to “Proposals for a reformed judicial pension scheme” were positive and acknowledged that our proposed reforms would make a significant contribution to resolving recruitment and retention issues.

In response to some concerns that were raised about our proposal to introduce a uniform member contribution rate, we have decided to give judges the temporary option of reducing their contributions to the scheme in return for a commensurate reduction in the accrual rate.

Save for the addition of this new feature, we will implement the reformed scheme in line with the proposals set out in the consultation document we published last July, subject to the necessary parliamentary approval.

The response document is available online at:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/consultation-on-a-reformed-judicial-pension-scheme>

Reform of the judicial pension scheme has been a personal priority of mine as Lord Chancellor, and I am pleased that we are in a position to progress a reform package that will resolve the serious recruitment and retention problems facing the judiciary. It is vital that we continue to attract and retain high-calibre judges, thereby securing the proper functioning of our justice system and supporting the UK’s wider prosperity.

The aim, subject to parliamentary time allowing the necessary legislation to be passed, is to implement the reformed scheme in April 2022.

The two consultation response documents have been placed in the Library of the House.

[HCWS805]

“Closed Material Procedure” Provisions in Justice and Security Act 2013: Statutory Review

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Robert Buckland): I am today announcing the establishment of the statutory review of the “closed material procedure” (CMP) provisions in the Justice and Security Act 2013.

The use of CMP is set out in sections 6 to 11 of the Act, about the disclosure of sensitive material in civil proceedings. In particular, section 6 of the Act empowers senior courts, the Supreme Court, the Court of Appeal and the High Court, including in Northern Ireland, and the Court of Session in Scotland, to make a declaration that the case is one in which a closed material application may be made in relation to specific pieces of material, the disclosure of which would be damaging to national security. An application for the declaration may be made by either the defendant or the claimant and a court can also make a CMP declaration of its own motion. Information on the use of CMP under the Act is already publicly available and can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/use-of-closed-material-procedure-reports>

Section 13 of the Act contains a requirement to review the use of CMP under the Act, as soon as reasonably practicable, after five years from when the

relevant section of the Act came into force. The review must therefore cover the period from 25 June 2013 to 24 June 2018.

These are the terms of the reference for the review, broadly mirroring the requirements set out in the Act and its explanatory notes:

“1. In accordance with s. 13(1) and (2) of the Justice and Security Act 2013, to review the operation of the following sections of the Act covering the period from 25 June 2013 to 24 June 2018:

Section 6 (declaration permitting closed material applications in proceedings)

Section 7 (review and revocation of declaration under section 6)

Section 8 (determination by court of applications in section 6 proceedings)

Section 9 (appointment of special advocate)

Section 10 (saving for normal disclosure rules)

Section 11 (general provision about section 6 proceedings)

2. In relation to the above, to review the operation of section 17(3)(e) (disclosure proceedings) of the Act, and of those procedure rules relevant to sections 6-11 of the Act.

3. To report to the Secretary of State for Justice.

In accordance with s. 13(5) and (6) of the Act, the Secretary of State must lay a copy of the reviewer's report before Parliament. Before doing so, the Secretary of State may, after consulting the reviewer, exclude from the copy any part of the report that would, in the opinion of the Secretary of State, be damaging to the interests of national security if it were included in the copy laid before Parliament.”

I am pleased to confirm that Sir Duncan Ouseley, retired High Court Judge, has accepted to conduct the review. He has been selected on the basis of his extensive judicial experience, including on national security cases, which will be an asset to complete the review promptly and effectively.

Sir Duncan Ouseley was called to the Bar (G) in 1973, took Silk in 1992, (NI) in 1997 and was elected a Bencher in 2000. He was appointed a Recorder in 1994, a Judge of the High Court (Queen's Bench) in 2000 and Chairman of the Special Immigration Appeal Commission from 2003 to 2006. He was appointed President of the Immigration Appeal Tribunal from 2003 to 2005 and Lead Judge, Administrative Court from 2010 to 2015. The Honourable Sir Duncan Brian Walter Ouseley retired from the High Court (Queen's Bench) with effect from 17 May 2019.

[HCWS803]

SCOTLAND

Contingencies Fund Advance

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Alister Jack): I hereby give notice of the Scotland Office's intention to seek an advance from the Contingencies Fund. The Department requires an advance to meet an urgent cash requirement pending parliamentary approval of the Supplementary Estimates 2020-21.

The Scotland Office's net cash limit for 2020-21, approved in the main Supply Estimate, will be reached by the start of March 2021. This is a consequence of

meeting in full the funding requirements of the Scottish Government. Significant additional consequential funding for the Scottish Government, arising from announcements made by the UK Government, will be provided in the Supplementary Supply Estimate. This will cover the increased costs incurred by the Scottish Government in response to the covid-19 pandemic.

Parliamentary approval for additional non-budget expenditure of £3,537,561,000 will be sought in a Supplementary Estimate for the Scotland Office. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £3,537,561,000 will be met by a repayable cash advance from the Contingencies Fund.

The advance will be repaid immediately following the Royal Assent of the Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) Bill in March 2021.

[HCWS804]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Personal Independence Payment

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Justin Tomlinson): The Department has published the latest update on progress on making backdated payments to personal independence payment claimants who are affected by the MH and RJ decisions of the upper tribunal. The release is published at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/pip-administrative-exercise-progress-on-cases-cleared>

The MH decision changed how overwhelming psychological distress is considered when assessing someone's ability to plan and follow a journey. The RJ decision changed how we decide whether someone can carry out an activity safely and if they need supervision. We started the administrative exercise on 25 June 2018 and a frequently asked questions document is available in the Library of the House and at: [http://data.parliament.uk/DepositedPapers/Files/DEP2020-0061/FAQ_-](http://data.parliament.uk/DepositedPapers/Files/DEP2020-0061/FAQ_-_Implementation_of_legal_decisions_MH_and_RJ.pdf)

[_Implementation_of_legal_decisions_MH_and_RJ.pdf](http://data.parliament.uk/DepositedPapers/Files/DEP2020-0061/FAQ_-_Implementation_of_legal_decisions_MH_and_RJ.pdf)
As at 17 January 2021, we have assessed 890,000 cases against the MH decision and 990,000 cases against the RJ decision. Around 6,600 arrears payments, totalling around £32 million, have been made.

It should be noted that in supporting the Government's response to the coronavirus pandemic, the exercise was paused from April to October 2020.

We will release a further update by the end of 2021.

[HCWS796]

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Recon“United Kingdom Research and Innovation: PhD Funding”

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Amanda Solloway): I am tabling this statement for the benefit of hon. and right hon. Members, to bring to their attention the support that the Government are providing to United Kingdom research and innovation (UKRI) funded doctoral

students to address the challenges related to covid-19 restrictions. This is an update to the statement laid on the 22nd February, which contained an administrative error.

When lockdown began last year, UKRI communicated immediately that PhD studentships should not be suspended, ensuring students could continue to receive their stipends. In April 2020, £44 million of urgent funding was announced for up to 6-month extensions for PhD students in their final year who could not complete their studies as originally planned due to covid-19 restrictions. This was taken up by 77% of eligible students.

In November 2020, a further £19.1 million was allocated to research organisations hosting UKRI funded students. This enabled those organisations to target additional support to those UKRI funded students who needed it most including those whose study had been impacted by caring responsibilities or health reasons, and those in their final year.

These two phases of funding amount to over £60 million of funding and will provide support to approximately 10,000 students.

Since the introduction of the current restrictions in January, the Government have continued to monitor the impact on the research sector. I asked UKRI to explore what else could be done to help and I can now confirm that we will be providing additional support to UKRI funded PhD students.

The £7 million unused from the April allocation for course extensions will now be made available to allocate extensions, based on need, to those students still to complete their studies. Additionally, UKRI is exploring options to increase flexibility for grant holding organisations to allocate existing funding for training and cohort development activity to fund extensions.

Research England will also be delivering around £11million of block grant funding to English universities as a contribution to their support for their postgraduate research communities, including to students funded by universities themselves and to self-financed students.

By the end of this phase of support funding, UKRI will have provided additional support, including extensions, to around half of all their funded students who were studying at the start of the first lockdown extension. This support has been targeted at those most in need and with equality, diversity and inclusion considered throughout.

Ensuring that the research sector in the UK has the people and skills it needs is crucial to realising Government ambition to cement our status as a science superpower. We will continue to monitor this situation closely, to ensure that we are able to consider additional support if necessary.

[HCWS786]

ORAL ANSWERS

Thursday 25 February 2021

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
INTERNATIONAL TRADE	1073	INTERNATIONAL TRADE—continued	
Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership	1082	High Growth Global Markets	1078
EU VAT Regulations under DDP Terms	1086	Scottish Exports to US: Tariffs	1085
Free Trade Agreement: Australia	1085	Topical Questions	1086
G7 Presidency	1081	Trade Deals: Human Rights Clauses	1075
Growth for British Businesses	1083	Trade Deals with ASEAN Countries	1073

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Thursday 25 February 2021

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
ATTORNEY GENERAL	34WS	FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE	33WS
Reconsidering a Prosecution Decision: Revised CPS Guidance	34WS	Myanmar	33WS
BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY	42WS	HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	37WS
Recon“United Kingdom Research and Innovation: PhD Funding”	42WS	International Recruitment of Health and Social Care Personnel: Code of Practice	37WS
CABINET OFFICE	34WS	Safety of UK Plasma for Fractionation to Make Immunoglobulins: Revised Advice	38WS
Withdrawal Agreement Joint Committee Meeting: 24 February 2021	34WS	JUSTICE	39WS
DEFENCE	35WS	Judicial Pensions	39WS
War Pensions Scheme Uprating 2021	35WS	“Closed Material Procedure” Provisions in Justice and Security Act 2013: Statutory Review	40WS
EDUCATION	37WS	SCOTLAND	41WS
Schools Capital Funding	37WS	Contingencies Fund Advance	41WS
		TREASURY	35WS
		Finance Bill 2021	35WS
		WORK AND PENSIONS	42WS
		Personal Independence Payment	42WS

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CONTENTS

Thursday 25 February 2021

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 1073] [see index inside back page]
Secretary of State for International Trade

Business of the House [Col. 1091]
Statement—(Mr Rees-Mogg)

Education Return and Awarding Qualifications in 2021 [Col. 1108]
Statement—(Gavin Williamson)

Rough Sleeping [Col. 1122]
Statement—(Robert Jenrick)

Growing Back Better Report [Col. 1139]
Select Committee Statement—(Philip Dunne)

Backbench Business

Education Route Map: Covid-19 [Col. 1148]
Motion—(Robert Halfon)—agreed to

Welsh Affairs [Col. 1177]
Motion—(Kevin Brennan)—agreed to

Alcohol Duty [Col. 1204]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Written Statements [Col. 33WS]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
