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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Monday 1 March 2021

HER MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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(FORMED BY THE RT HON. BORIS JOHNSON, MP, DECEMBER 2019)

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OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-EIGHTH PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 17 DECEMBER 2019]

SEVENTIETH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 690

TWENTY-SECOND VOLUME OF SESSION 2019-2021

House of Commons

Monday 1 March 2021

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

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

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

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

The Secretary of State was asked—

Covid-19: Learning Catch-up

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): What support his Department is providing to help children catch up on learning lost during the covid-19 outbreak. [912659]

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): What support his Department is providing to help children catch up on learning lost during the covid-19 outbreak. [912670]

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson): Helping pupils make up learning is vital, which is why the Government have invested £1.7 billion in helping education settings boost pupils' learning, including additional funding for tutoring, early language support and summer schools. We have appointed an education recovery commissioner to advise on this work.

Julian Sturdy [V]: Sadly, the impact of school closures over the past 12 months will be felt for a long time to come, with a gaping educational divide opening up as a result. I therefore very much welcome the Government's intention to provide a catch-up programme over the summer, but will my right hon. Friend clarify how he proposes to target support to reach students who have fallen behind most over the past year—those who have been really affected by this lockdown?

Gavin Williamson: My hon. Friend raises an important point. The spectrum and range of children who are perhaps needing that extra support is broad and wide. That is why it has been so important to give schools the flexibility to target the funding at the children who are most in need of that support, regardless of their background. Showing confidence in teachers to be able to target that support is very important.

Jack Brereton [V]: Children in areas of high deprivation, of whom, as my right hon. Friend knows, there are many across Stoke-on-Trent, have had less teaching time during the pandemic. Will he ensure that those children are prioritised, as we work to ensure that all children can catch up with their education?

Gavin Williamson: Very much so. Let me take the opportunity to congratulate my hon. Friend on securing a new free school, which will be built in his constituency, really boosting educational attainment for his constituents in Stoke-on-Trent South. He is right to say that we need a targeted approach to supporting students to catch up and to making sure that they do not miss out as a result of the pandemic.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Even before the pandemic, child poverty stood at more than 4 million, up more than 700,000 since Labour left office, and progress on narrowing the attainment gap between disadvantaged and other students had stalled. What targets has the Secretary of State set to address those shocking failures?

Gavin Williamson: We recognise that there is a broad impact on so many young people. We recognise that our work on closing the attainment gap between the richest and the poorest has been impacted as a result of the pandemic, which is why we are taking a targeted approach to our investments, looking at things such as catch up. That is why we have asked Sir Kevan Collins to look in detail at the actions that we can best take on helping children, especially those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, to catch up.

Kate Green: But just days from the Budget, there is still no commitment to keep the £20 uplift in universal credit, no sign that the Secretary of State will abandon the public sector pay freeze, and he has allocated just 43p per pupil per day to support catch up. Does he really believe that that is good enough, or will he stand up for children and families and tell the Chancellor that they must come first in the Budget?

Gavin Williamson: We on the Conservative Benches believe passionately in driving up educational standards, because we recognise that for children, especially those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, that is the best way to give them the opportunities in life that we want to see every child have. That is why we have so passionately pursued that agenda for the past 11 years, and we will continue to pursue that agenda of raising standards for all children in all schools across the country. Our £1.7 billion package supporting children to catch up will make a real difference because it is targeted and evidence based, making sure that children will be supported to help them to get the very best as they come out of this lockdown and go back to school next week.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con) [V]: When the Department for Education previously delivered a programme of summer schools for disadvantaged students in 2013, it identified that only 50% of disadvantaged pupils who were invited actually attended, and the Education Endowment Foundation found particular difficulties with attendance in areas outside London. What specific measures is the Department taking to ensure that the most disadvantaged benefit from the catch-up programmes and summer schools on offer? Will the Department set out a timetable for publishing regular data about the progress in children's outcomes as a direct result of the catch-up programme, and how will we use that data to adapt the programme to ensure transparency that the schemes are working and the money is being well spent?

Gavin Williamson: We commissioned Renaissance Learning to look at the evidence and ensure that we are properly tracking how the money is being spent and the outcomes. My right hon. Friend raises a really important point about the summer schools programme. We want to see this money being used by schools right across the country. We do not want only children in London to benefit from this, but children in every part of the nation. Our regional schools commissioners will be working closely with multi-academy trusts, individual schools and local authorities to do everything we can to ensure that all schools take up this fantastic offer and that there is the widest possible participation in the scheme.

Sixth-Form Student Funding

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of funding for sixth-form students. [912660]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan): This Government are committed to delivering a high-quality education for all students, which is why we are investing an extra £291 million in 16 to 19 education in 2021-22, in addition to the £400 million awarded in the 2019 spending review. This is the biggest injection of new money into 16 to 19-year-olds in a single year for over a decade.

Andrew Gwynne [V]: I thank the Minister for her answer, but in reality the funding that she mentions does not scratch the surface after a decade of real-terms cuts. The cost of educating sixth-formers has risen and student numbers have ballooned, due to covid and demographics. As such, the rate increase will likely be entirely eaten up by inflation alone in the coming year. Will she finally commit to increasing the rate to at least £4,760—the level recommended by the Raise the Rate campaign, and supported by experts across the sector, including the Education Committee and Ofsted's chief inspector?

Gillian Keegan: It is important to spell out that the money we are talking about is not the only money that goes into further education. As well as the base rate, we have invested another £7 billion this academic year to ensure that there is a place for everybody in education and training, and an extra £83 million in capital funding to ensure that we can accommodate the demographic increase in 16 to 19-year-olds that the hon. Gentleman mentioned. On top of that, we have £1.5 billion in capital funding, T-level funding going up to £500 million a year and more funding for apprenticeships and skills boot camps. There is a whole plethora of additional funding, not just the base rate.

Covid-19: Financial Support for Students

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support university students facing financial hardship as a result of the covid-19 outbreak. [912661]

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): What financial support he has provided to students affected by the covid-19 lockdown. [912669]

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support university students facing financial hardship as a result of the covid-19 outbreak. [912678]

The Minister for Universities (Michelle Donelan): We are making available an additional £70 million of student hardship funding this financial year. This money is in addition to the £256 million of assisting higher education funding that providers can draw upon in the academic year to support students in hardship.

Felicity Buchan: I thank my hon. Friend for doing a Zoom call with my Kensington students and those at Imperial College. A number of students raised concerns

that they were not getting value for money out of their tuition and accommodation during the pandemic. Will my hon. Friend address those concerns?

Michelle Donelan: This has been a really challenging and difficult time for students. The Government expect that quality is maintained, and the Office for Students has been clear that all higher education providers must continue to comply with the registration conditions relating to quality and standards. Accommodation providers are autonomous, but the Government urge all large providers to have students' interests at heart and provide refunds; we thank the plethora of universities that have already done so, including—but not limited to—Nottingham, Sheffield, London School of Economics, Bath and Essex, to name a few.

Cat Smith: There is a huge issue with students being legally unable to return to accommodation that they are legally obliged to pay for. The Prime Minister has said that he will look into this. Indeed, when I questioned him about the matter on 22 February, he said:

“We will do whatever we can to support them,”

and we will,

“help them to get compensation.”—[*Official Report*, 22 February 2021; Vol. 689, c. 656.]

Can the Minister put some flesh on the bones about what the Prime Minister meant when he talked about compensation for students who are legally unable to return to accommodation that they have to pay for?

Michelle Donelan: As I have said, this has been a difficult time for students. There are students who are having to pay twice and may be being charged by their parents. That is exactly why we announced £70 million of additional financial hardship funding on top of the £256 million. I urge any student listening to this to go to their university and get the support available to help them at this time.

Jo Gideon [V]: The fantastic Staffordshire University is in my constituency of Stoke-on-Trent Central, and since the start of the pandemic I have received several messages from students and constituents attending the university with concerns about their financial position. Many of them were placed on furlough and have experienced reduced hours, while also being locked into private tenancy agreements throughout this academic year; they are therefore unable to benefit from the rent reductions offered by Staffordshire University to students living in on-site accommodation.

What consideration has my hon. Friend given to students in similar positions across the country? Would she consider altering the loan available to students whose household income has been affected significantly during this difficult time?

Michelle Donelan: My first message to students would be to go to their university and seek hardship funding, because we have made available an additional £70 million that needs to be spent by April to support students, including international and postgraduate students. Any student who is not receiving the maximum loan but whose household income has changed by 15% may be able to get additional support. They should fill in an income circumstances form for the Student Loans Company and get the support available to them.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Many students have lost the part-time work they rely on and their financial concerns are helping to fuel their mental health crisis. The Scottish Government have given students studying in Scotland the equivalent of £78 per student; the Welsh Labour Government have given students studying in Wales the equivalent of £302 per student. The UK Government have given students studying in England the equivalent of £45 per student. Why do this Government put such a low value on the welfare of students in England?

Michelle Donelan: Quite to the contrary, we put an extremely important value on the welfare of our students. That is exactly why one of our first actions in this pandemic was to allow more flexibility with the £256 million that can support student hardship, and we have recently given an additional £70 million that needs to be spent in this financial year. We are keeping all this under review, but our priority has been getting additional money into the pockets of students who may be facing financial hardship right here and right now.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP) [V]: The pandemic is affecting many part-time opportunities and that is having an impact on international students who are struggling to make ends meet. I think we were all disturbed to see the images of international students queuing outside a food bank in east London.

The Scottish Government have expanded hardship support to specifically include international students. The Minister has mentioned the hardship support available from her Government, but Universities UK reports that international students are not coming forward for it because they have concerns about how this might impact their visa or immigration status. Can she confirm that work has been done so that these students can come forward and it will not impact their immigration status?

Michelle Donelan: Hardship funding in England has always been applicable to international students. We have worked hard to get that message out there; I recently wrote a letter specifically addressed to international students. We continue to disseminate that message. The hon. Member is quite right: it will have no implications for their visas if they choose to take that money.

School Breakfast Provision

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of school breakfast provision throughout England. [912662]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Vicky Ford): It is important that pupils have access to a healthy breakfast meal to enhance their learning potential. That is why we are investing up to £38 million in the national school breakfast programme, which is providing breakfast meals in up to 2,450 schools in disadvantaged areas across the country.

Mrs Lewell-Buck [V]: I thank the Minister for her response, but unfortunately the Government's current school breakfast programme only provides for 7% of schools that meet the Government's deprivation criteria, and it ends in July. Pre-pandemic, up to 2 million children

were starting their school day without a breakfast. My School Breakfast Bill would extend and scale up provision via funds from the soft drinks levy. Please can she ask the Chancellor to implement my Bill and get breakfast into the Budget?

Vicky Ford: I completely agree that a healthy and nutritious breakfast sets a child up for a learning day. We have extended our programme until July this year and we are considering options for breakfast provision beyond that date. We are engaging with the market to help develop those options, and we expect to be able to say more very soon.

Covid-19: Pupils Receiving Free School Meals

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effect of the covid-19 outbreak on the attainment of pupils in receipt of free school meals. [912663]

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): Our education recovery package supports pupils most in need of catch-up support, including pupils receiving free school meals. The hon. Member asks about assessments we have conducted on the effects of the pandemic on the attainment of pupils. We have commissioned a study to assess the progress of pupils during this academic year, including groups such as pupils receiving free school meals. Initial findings from the study of 400,000 reading and maths assessments were published last week.

Kevin Brennan [V]: May I wish you and the House a happy Saint David's day, Mr Speaker? The Secretary of State has said that no child's prospects should be blighted by the pandemic and that he would not be timid in his responses, but earlier he sounded vague when he was asked for specifics. The schools Minister has had the job for a decade, so he should not need to outsource his answer to consultants. What specific interventions are being planned by Ministers to target those poor pupils for whom the pandemic has been an extinction level event for their education?

Nick Gibb: The hon. Member will not find anyone in this House more committed to closing the attainment gap caused by the pandemic than this team of Education Ministers and this Secretary of State. Last year, we committed £1 billion to help all students catch up on their lost education, including a £350 million national tutoring programme for the most disadvantaged and most in need. Last month, the Prime Minister announced a further £300 million of catch-up funding, and last week we increased it by a further £400 million. That is £1.7 billion in total committed to ensuring that no pupil will suffer long-term damage to their prospects as a result of the pandemic.

Covid-19: Education Outcomes

Shabana Mahmood (Birmingham, Ladywood) (Lab): To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment he has made of the effect of the covid-19 outbreak on education outcomes. [912664]

Mr Speaker: This questioner has withdrawn, but we still have the substantive question to the Secretary of State.

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson): As the Minister for School Standards set out, we have commissioned a study to assess the progress of pupils this academic year, initial findings from which were published last week. That study has informed the development of our £1.7 billion investment to give education settings support to boost our children's education.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Those listening to the Secretary of State's answers in this session so far will fear previous failures being repeated. He talks about a targeted approach, but in the next breath says it is up to teachers to decide where those budgets are targeted.

Once again, we have got the Secretary of State showing a complete lack of leadership, which leads to funds being unspent and his initiatives failing. We have seen it on exams, we have seen it on testing, we have seen it on school returns, we have seen it on university student wellbeing, and we have seen it on BTECs. We need a Secretary of State capable of providing the clarity, the leadership and the ambition required to support a generation of schoolchildren. If he cannot, will he please step aside and let us get a Secretary of State who can?

Gavin Williamson: That was a very well read question by the hon. Member. What we are doing is a combination of things, because we on this side of the House understand that teachers will have an acute understanding of those children who have suffered most as a result of being out of the classroom. We have understood that children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are most helped by small group tuition. We have created the national tutoring programme—a specifically targeted programme—and all the evidence points to the simple fact that by taking this approach, we have the biggest impact in terms of helping children catch up with lost learning.

The hon. Gentleman probably has little interest or regard for facts or evidence, and that is probably evidenced by the fact that that is how the Labour party came up with its last manifesto. But we do care about evidence. Actually, the evidence shows that by having these targeted interventions, yet giving support to teachers to be able to help children who need it most, we will be able to help the maximum number of children.

Children in Asylum Accommodation: Remote Learning

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): What support the Government have provided to ensure that children living in asylum accommodation with limited or no wi-fi during covid-19 lockdowns are able to access remote learning. [912665]

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): The Get Help with Technology programme is helping disadvantaged children in England without a connection at home, including those living in asylum accommodation, to access the internet. We have delivered more than 60,000 4G wireless routers and are partnering with the UK's leading mobile operators to provide free data uplifts.

Anne McLaughlin [V]: Wi-fi is not a standard feature in asylum accommodation. As more and more learning is done online, even outside of the pandemic, is the Minister prepared to work with counterparts in the Home Office to ensure that all children in the asylum system are able to access digital learning opportunities, so that they do not fall behind and are able to integrate as quickly as possible?

Nick Gibb: Yes, of course. The Home Office is in charge of the asylum seeker estate, and it does ensure that wi-fi is available. In terms of schools generally, as of 15 February, more than 1 million laptops and tablets have been delivered to schools and local authorities. It is one of the biggest procurement exercises of its kind, with 1 million computers built to order and shipped to Britain, with software added before being delivered. The process started last April, and throughout the summer and autumn we continued to order more and more computers, as we prepared for future contingencies.

School Facilities

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve school facilities. [912666]

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson): We have announced the first 50 schools in the new school rebuilding programme as part of our commitment to rebuild 500 schools over the next decade. We have allocated £9.5 billion since 2015 to maintain and improve school buildings, including an additional £560 million for the last financial year, and we have committed a further £1.8 billion for 2021-22.

Dr Evans [V]: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for his answer, especially regarding improvements. Hastings High School in Burbage, a popular school in my constituency, made an application for urgent capital support funding for its perimeter fence, which it deems a safeguarding issue. Unfortunately, it was declined. What advice would he give to schools applying for that fund, and will he meet me to discuss Hastings High School's issue and whether we can take this forward?

Gavin Williamson: I am not familiar with the fence in question, but I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend to discuss it in more detail and work with him and officials to see whether there is anything we can do to ensure that when the school bids for the next round, the bid is in the best possible position to succeed.

Pupils' Return to Schools: Lateral Flow Testing

Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the ability of parents to carry out lateral flow covid-19 testing on their children to support the return of pupils to schools as covid-19 lockdown restrictions are eased. [912667]

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson): Rapid testing using lateral flow devices will support the return to face-to-face education by helping to identify people who are infectious but do not have any symptoms. For secondary school staff and pupils, we are moving to a home-testing model, which will be rolled out once pupils have had three onsite tests.

Mary Glendon [V]: The charity Parentkind has expressed concerns about tests being missed or messed up and their limited effectiveness even when used correctly. What happens to those who refuse to take the tests, and when will clear guidance be issued on how to administer the tests and report the results?

Gavin Williamson: I appreciate the hon. Lady's highlighting this issue, which is an area of concern for us all. That is why there is a process of three asymptomatic tests that are to be rolled out at the start of the term. The guidance on how to do it has already been with schools for quite a considerable period. We are also asking all schools to maintain an asymptomatic testing station onsite, so that if a child has, for some reason, not been able to take a test at home, they can get a test under supervision at school, to make sure that we capture and support all children.

Technology in Schools: Learning Legacy

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to ensure that new uses of technology and the Government's provision of additional computers to schools leave a legacy for future learning. [912668]

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson): Technology has been essential to teaching remotely, and I pay credit to the entire education workforce for doing this. In the longer term, it has the potential to improve pupil outcomes and operational efficiency. We are building on our significant investment in devices, training and digital services to create a lasting digital legacy.

Mrs Murray [V]: What work has my right hon. Friend's Department undertaken to look at using virtual platforms, with which children are now familiar, to set up international meetings to help improve foreign language skills and knowledge of different cultures?

Gavin Williamson: My hon. Friend raises an important opportunity with this new access to technology—access to technology that so many children have benefited from—and making sure that it lasts for a long time. We have invested £4.3 million in supporting schools to get on to new digital platforms, and we very much hope that they really take the opportunity to use these platforms to get the very best for their students.

If I may, however, I will also give a little plug for the new Turing scheme. The Turing scheme will not be about visiting people digitally, but—and this is hard to imagine, as it seems such a long time since we were able to enjoy foreign travel—about enabling children to visit different destinations right around the globe and to learn languages in person, as well as through a digital platform.

Covid-19: Safety of Early Years and Specialist Settings

Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help keep staff in (a) early years settings, (b) special schools and (c) alternative provision safe during the covid-19 outbreak. [912671]

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help ensure that early years and childcare settings are covid-19 secure. [912676]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Vicky Ford): All settings must comply with health and safety law. They should follow our guidance so that systems of control are in place to reduce the risk of transmission for pupils and staff, and we have bespoke guidance for special schools, alternative provision and early years settings. Furthermore, to keep covid out of the classrooms and other settings, we have expanded testing to schools, pre-schools and nurseries.

Feryal Clark [V]: Covid cases in early years providers have nearly doubled since the first week of January to the highest level so far seen during this pandemic, and many nursery workers and childminders have been understandably worried about continuing to look after all children in lockdown, without a proper explanation of why this is safe and without a clear plan to ensure that providers can access proper mass testing and the personal protective equipment they need. Why have the Government done so little to reassure them?

Vicky Ford: The earliest years are the most crucial point of a child's development, and we know that caring for our youngest children cannot be done remotely. The current evidence continues to show that pre-school children under the age of five are less susceptible to covid and unlikely to have a driving role in transmission. All the data that we base decisions on is public, and further scientific evidence was shared just last week.

Matt Western [V]: Ten days ago, there were five covid cases in different nursery settings in Warwick and Leamington—the worst for many months. If the Government want to keep early years open, how does the Minister think nurseries can remain viable without mass testing, FFP3-grade PPE or, indeed, the financial support that was available in the first lockdown?

Vicky Ford: This Government are committed to supporting the early years, and we will be spending about £3.6 billion on early years funding this year, but to provide extra safety, we are rolling out home test kits for all those in nurseries and pre-schools—the staff in nurseries and pre-schools—from 22 March.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab) [V]: Social distancing is impossible in early years settings and special schools, where staff often provide close contact care, and it has been a nightmare for them to operate at high capacity in lockdown, with many staff off sick or self-isolating. Vaccinating school staff over half-term and prioritising key workers such as early years staff, once the most vulnerable have been jabbed, would have relieved this pressure, protected staff and helped to keep children learning, so why did the Government miss this open goal?

Vicky Ford: The top priority for vaccines must be to protect those most at risk of dying or being hospitalised by this hideous disease. It also involves protecting those who are caring for those most at risk. That could include, for example, a carer of a clinically extremely vulnerable child, but it would not necessarily include everyone who is working in an early years setting.

National Education Union Recovery Plan

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): If he will implement the National Education Union's education recovery plan. [912672]

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): Our priority is ensuring that no child is left behind as a result of the pandemic, and that is why we have prioritised the return of children to school and why we are providing a package of £700 million to support children and young people who need it most to catch up on lost education, on top of the £1 billion package launched last June. We are committed to continuing to work with school leaders and unions, including the NEU, to develop our longer-term plans.

Ian Lavery [V]: There has been a worrying pattern during this pandemic where, time and again, the Government have ignored the science, closing schools too late and opening them too early. Many scientists are warning that the Government's measures for schools are not strong enough on their own to protect pupils and staff against the risks of airborne transmission. The Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies recommended a phased return to schools, and Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have listened. With this Government forging ahead regardless, so much more must be done to tackle the critical issues of PPE, adequate ventilation in classrooms, special educational needs and disability, and vaccination. We need to protect our key workers. Has the Minister got a grip on that?

Nick Gibb: Every step of the way we follow the science. We are focused on ensuring that we do everything we can to keep covid out of the classroom and minimise the risk of transmission. That is why schools are going to enormous lengths to increase hygiene levels and ensure that pupils wash their hands frequently throughout the day, and why there are bubbles so that pupils do not mix unnecessarily. There is increased ventilation. There are one-way systems, staggered lunch and break times, face masks in secondary schools, and we are testing all staff and secondary school pupils twice a week. As the Chief Medical Officer has said, the best place for pupils is in school, as that is best for their wellbeing and education.

Education for Children with SEND

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help ensure that children with special educational needs and disabilities receive a quality education. [912674]

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help ensure that children with special educational needs and disabilities receive a quality education. [912677]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Vicky Ford): The pandemic has been especially hard for children with special educational needs and disabilities, and their families. We have increased high-needs funding by £780 million this year, with another £730 million next

year—a 24% increase. Our SEND review is well under way, and focuses on ensuring that the system supports and delivers for every child.

Henry Smith [V]: What particular educational support is being provided to children with dyslexia through the covid-19 pandemic restrictions?

Vicky Ford: That is an excellent question. We know that for children with special education needs, including dyslexia, the impact of school closures may have been greater than for other children. The additional £700 million of recovery funding announced last week, on top of the £1 billion already provided, can be used by schools for extra support for those with SEND. Of the 33 providers on the national tutoring programme, 26 have specific expertise in supporting children with special educational needs.

Nigel Mills [V]: I know from the three special schools in my constituency what an amazing job the teachers do to support children and young people with complex disabilities, as well as special educational needs. Will the Minister confirm that all teachers in those settings are entitled to a covid jab? What else can the Government do to support schools to be covid-secure?

Vicky Ford: I thank all schools, especially those special schools that have helped to care for vulnerable children throughout the pandemic. Attendance has risen. We have provided bespoke advice on testing children with special educational needs, and we will provide families of all pupils with access to home testing, including those with special educational needs. That will help to keep covid out of the classroom. Where a teacher is supporting a clinically extremely vulnerable child, as the care provider that teacher may also be entitled to a vaccine, and those decisions are made locally.

Brain Injury: Specialist Education Support

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): What estimate he has made of the number of pupils under the age of 18 who are in receipt of specialist education support as a result of experiencing a brain injury in the last 12 months. [912675]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Vicky Ford): The Department does not collect specific data on brain injuries. A pupil's acquired brain injury could manifest in many different ways, and support should be tailored to their learning barriers, irrespective of the diagnosis. The SEND code of practice asks schools and colleges to address pupils' individual educational needs, regardless of their condition.

Chris Bryant [V]: Happy St David's day, Mr Speaker.

I really find that a disappointing answer. There will be children going back to school after several weeks who will have had brain injuries of various kinds. If the Department does not even keep statistics on them, it is probably likely that lots of headteachers will not even know whether their children have had acquired brain injuries. Sometimes, the results of a brain injury can look remarkably like being naughty or unco-operative in school, and kids end up being excluded despite the fact that they have a medical condition. The special educational needs

code still does not even mention brain injury. How are we ever going to take this seriously if we do not even gather the information and make sure that those children who really need support get it? It is often referred to as a hidden disability; well, it is completely hidden from the Minister herself.

Vicky Ford: No, the Government take brain injury and the devastating impact that it can have on a child's life especially seriously, but the important thing is to make sure that each child gets the support that they need for their particular circumstances. That is why the SEND system is specifically designed to get the right support to each individual child, and that is what we are working on through the SEND review. I am very happy to discuss with the hon. Member exactly how we are working on making sure that each child gets the support that they need for how the brain injury manifests for that child.

International Study Opportunities

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to increase international study opportunities for students. [912679]

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson): The Government are committed to international study opportunities. We have demonstrated that through our introduction of the Turing scheme and our recent update to the international education strategy. The new Turing scheme is backed by £110 million and provides funding for around 35,000 students in universities, colleges and schools to go on placements and exchanges around the world, starting in September this year.

Damian Hinds [V]: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for that response. Like him, I very much welcome the widening of partnerships and cultural discovery that will be possible under the Turing scheme, but will he say how he will ensure that the scheme also widens access, including for young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds?

Gavin Williamson: We are putting in place additional support for students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds to help cover the cost of travel to those destinations. It is vital that, as we construct the Turing scheme and we invite new partners into it, we do so such that it is a brilliant way of creating opportunities for children of every single background to study abroad and understand the benefits of working collaboratively on the international stage.

Post-16 Education and Training

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reform post-16 education and training. [912680]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan): As set out in the "Skills for Jobs" White Paper, we are implementing an ambitious reform programme that will revolutionise technical education in this country. The White Paper is focused on giving people the skills they need in a flexible way that suits them so that they can get great jobs in sectors that the economy needs, which will also boost this country's productivity.

Peter Aldous [V]: I welcome my hon. Friend's answer. The proposals set out in the further education White Paper are extremely welcome. In Suffolk and Norfolk, the colleges, the chambers of commerce and the local enterprise partnership are keen to get on with putting these plans into practice so as to ensure both that there are exciting and well-paid jobs available locally for young people, and that our region is well placed to take advantage of the great opportunities in the energy, logistics and agritech sectors. I will be most grateful if my hon. Friend sets out the timetable and the criteria for selecting skills for jobs trailblazers, and if she can confirm that a bid from our region will be welcome.

Gillian Keegan: I am delighted to hear that there is such enthusiasm in Suffolk and Norfolk for engaging with and helping to implement our flagship reforms. We will run an open process to select the trailblazing local areas in which the first local skills improvement plans will be developed. We will certainly welcome a bid from Suffolk and Norfolk, championed no doubt by my hon. Friends the Members for Waveney (Peter Aldous), and for Ipswich (Tom Hunt). Further information, including the criteria for selection, will be announced very shortly, so there is not long to wait.

Safety of School Students and Staff

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help ensure the safety of students and staff when schools re-open as covid-19 lockdown restrictions are eased. [912681]

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help ensure the safety of students and staff when schools re-open as covid-19 lockdown restrictions are eased. [912683]

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson): The decision to return to full attendance is based on a balance of risk—on protecting our NHS while protecting students from the harms of missing education. Our decision is evidence-based. We have introduced safety measures, including testing and the extended use of face coverings, alongside other systems of control to minimise transmission of covid.

Andy Carter [V]: I thank the Secretary of State for his answer. Having spoken to a number of heads this morning, I know that schools across Warrington South are busy preparing for the return of all their pupils a week today. I know that he will join me in paying tribute to the efforts of teachers and heads. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that his Department has provided timely guidance for school leaders, and taken every precaution to ensure the safety of both staff and students on their return?

Gavin Williamson: I would very much like to join my hon. Friend in thanking teachers, headteachers and all staff for all the work they are doing to be able to welcome back all children to school from 8 March—just next week. He is right to highlight the importance of making sure that everyone is working and being educated in a safe and secure environment. That is why we published clear guidance when the Prime Minister set out his road map on Monday last week, and why we put extra

precautions in place, such as testing for all pupils in secondary schools, and staff and workforce testing for all primary schools as well.

Laura Trott [V]: Teachers across Sevenoaks and Swanley have done a brilliant job at keeping schools open throughout the pandemic. However, many are worried about a full return. Will my right hon. Friend do all he can to share with headteachers the evidence on the low infection risk in schools, so that they are fully equipped to reassure teachers that schools are safe?

Gavin Williamson: My hon. Friend is right to highlight that concern, which is why, when we published our guidance on Monday last week, we published alongside it summarised data and evidence from the Office for National Statistics and Public Health England, making it freely available. It is right to make sure that all school environments are safe. That is why we are taking extra steps to make sure that testing is in place in secondary schools, providing confidence for children, parents, the whole education community, and the wider community.

Topical Questions

[912719] **Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con):** If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson): Next Monday, schools and colleges will welcome all pupils in England back to face-to-face education. I would like to offer my heartfelt thanks to teachers, support staff, parents and, most importantly, every single child for their tremendous efforts during lockdown. We have a robust testing regime in place to support reopening and reduced transmission, in order to help pupils catch up on missed learning. We have also announced a £700 million catch-up package, which builds on the £1 billion package we announced just over six months ago.

Mrs Drummond [V]: Extending the school day after covid should involve more than core curriculum subjects, as many pupils have already commented that they do not want a longer day at school to catch up. Does my right hon. Friend agree with me that subjects such as music, sport, drama, art and cookery to name a few, plus learning skills such as volunteering and work experience, which young people often cannot fit into the existing curriculum, should be included in an extended day to help young people to develop, rather than just catch up?

Gavin Williamson: We have asked Sir Kevan Collins to look at a whole range of different options, and to consult widely with the sector, parents and children on what is best. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the importance of enrichment in education. Yes, English, maths and the sciences are absolutely vital, but there are so many other skills and activities that also need to be part of a child's learning and what they get from school.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Last week, the Secretary of State confirmed that 120,000 pupils have been reached by the national tutoring programme, but it has reached fewer than 10% of all children on free

school meals. Given that we know that the need for additional tutoring support will extend to all pupils on free school meals, and many more besides, how do the Government have the brass neck to claim that they are doing all they can to tackle disadvantage and are being ambitious for children—our country's future—when their flagship scheme is reaching only a fraction of those pupils who need additional support?

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): Our flagship scheme—both the national tutoring programme and the academic mentors—will reach 750,000 disadvantaged pupils once it is fully rolled out. The Government are absolutely determined to ensure that all children are able to catch up, particularly the most disadvantaged pupils in our country.

[912722] **Laura Trott** (Sevenoaks) (Con) [V]: Following the welcome confirmation that additional money will be allocated to school building repairs, will my right hon. Friend reassure teachers and parents that Orchards Academy and West Kingsdown Primary School will be prioritised? I know from my visits how urgently the repair is needed, and that the money provided to date has not been sufficient to cover all the work.

Gavin Williamson: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting this issue, and I would be very happy to meet her to discuss this important work. We have an ambitious plan to upgrade our school estate. We have seen the roll-out of that, and even the shadow Education Secretary, the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), has benefited from the Government's investment in education—I am looking forward to the warm words of thanks that will no doubt be winging their way to me. I certainly hope that it is not just the shadow Education Secretary but my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott) who benefits.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP) [V]: According to UCAS data, the number of EU students applying to study in Scotland has fallen by 40% since Brexit, with Department for Education figures predicting a 57% drop in EU student numbers. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to promote our universities and attract more EU students to study in the UK?

Gavin Williamson: Obviously, Scottish universities are benefiting from bringing in additional fee income as a result of the changes that have happened. We have set out, as part of our international education strategy, a very ambitious plan to benefit all universities right across the United Kingdom. I would be very happy to send the hon. Lady a copy of the plan. Hopefully, she will see the real benefits of being part of the United Kingdom: we can market on a global level—not just in the European Union, but right across the world—to attract international students.

[912724] **Chris Clarkson** (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): *Diolch yn fawr, and dydd gŵyl Dewi hapus, Mr Speaker.* I put on record my thanks to the Department for Education's ministerial team for all the work that they have done, especially in my Heywood and Middleton constituency, to put the rights of vulnerable children

first during the pandemic, but may I ask for an assurance that they will continue to champion the rights of children as we leave the pandemic?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Vicky Ford): The Government are fully committed to protecting and promoting children's rights; it is such an important issue. We strongly believe in the principles laid down in the UN convention on the rights of the child, which a Conservative Government ratified 30 years ago, in 1991. We regularly report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child on the great work that we have been doing across the UK to implement the UNCRC and to promote children's rights.

[912720] **Anne McLaughlin** (Glasgow North East) (SNP) [V]: Students who face additional barriers to learning often receive a bursary to help them overcome those barriers. If they apply for universal credit, the bursary is not counted as income—that is, unless they receive the Scottish Government care experience bursary. Will the Secretary of State speak to his counterparts in the Department for Work and Pensions to right this wrong, which I am sure must be an oversight, so that care experience students are not given support from the Scottish Government only to have it taken away again by the UK Government?

Gavin Williamson: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this point. I am happy to ask my office to get in touch with her for details, so that we can highlight this to the Department for Work and Pensions.

[912725] **Robert Halfon** (Harlow) (Con) [V]: The Schools Minister has said that pupils wearing masks on the school estate is a matter of advisory guidance. If a pupil, or a parent acting on their behalf, objects to complying with their headteacher's wish for pupils to wear a mask, are we not in danger of creating mask anarchy? Enormous pressure is being put on headteachers in Harlow because of the confusion, including Vic Goddard, the headteacher of Harlow Passmores School. Is it not better to come down firmly on one side or another, and provide clear, definitive regulations to help teaching staff?

Nick Gibb: We have said clearly that we strongly recommend that students in secondary schools wear face masks or face coverings in classrooms where it is not possible to keep a social distance between pupils. We have also said, for quite a number of months, that in communal areas of a secondary school, where it is not possible to maintain a social distance, staff, adults and students should also wear face masks. Face coverings are largely intended to protect others against the spread of infection, because they cover the nose and mouth, which are the main confirmed sources of transmission of the virus.

[912721] **Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab) [V]: Headteachers in Warwick and Leamington tell me that their pupil premium funding is being slashed. Given the huge increases in poverty resulting from the pandemic, why has the Minister decided to base pupil premium calculations on the number of children receiving free school meals in October 2020, rather than in January 2021, as would be standard practice?

Nick Gibb: Most national funding formula elements are based on the October census. The pupil premium is based on Ever 6, so any child who has been eligible for free school meals at any time in the past six years qualifies for the pupil premium. Changes in one particular year do not therefore make up a large proportion of pupil premium eligibility. On top of that, we announced last week an additional £300 million recovery premium, which is based on eligibility for free school meals. The October 2020 census will ensure that most schools will receive more money, and overall we expect the pupil premium to rise as a consequence of that census from £2.4 billion to £2.5 billion.

[912731] **Mark Fletcher** (Bolsover) (Con): On Friday, I spoke to two brilliant maintained nursery schools in my constituency. These schools are vital to families in South Normanton and Pinxton, but they are struggling without a sustainable financial future. Could my hon. Friend the Minister commit to pressuring the Treasury to give these schools the certainty that they need?

Vicky Ford: Maintained nursery schools often do a fantastic job, especially with children from disadvantaged backgrounds or with special educational needs, and they will continue to receive supplementary funding in the next financial year. The Government remain committed to long-term funding of maintained nursery schools, and we are considering how to ensure that we give those maintained nursery schools a long-term picture of their funding.

[912726] **Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab) [V]: The Home Office announced in October a joint review with the Department for Education on how immigration status and no recourse to public funds interacted with free school meals and other education entitlements. What is the status of that review? What conclusions has it reached so far? When is it expected to be complete?

Gavin Williamson: The right hon. Gentleman is right to highlight this. The Department made the decision to extend access to free school meals to these children during the pandemic. I would be happy to meet him to discuss all this in greater detail. That review is reaching the final stages of conclusion, but we have not yet been able to report. As soon as we do, we will inform the House.

[912733] **Dr Kieran Mullan** (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con) [V]: I have heard directly from providers such as Little Angels and the Westminster Nursery School in Crewe about the extra cost of operating as a result of covid, in what is already a difficult financial situation for the sector. What additional funding might we expect for early years providers, to help them play their role in supporting catch-up after the lockdown period?

Vicky Ford: On top of the £3.6 billion that we are planning to spend on early entitlements this year, there is the catch-up and recovery programme. That includes the amazing Nuffield early language intervention—NELI—scheme, which has already been adopted by 40% of reception classes across the country. The new recovery money that we announced last week includes another £10 million for early years projects, and I can tell the House more details about those very soon.

[912727] **Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): There have been repeated calls from the Labour party, teaching unions and others to vaccinate teachers before schools reopen fully, but they seem to have fallen on deaf ears. If teachers fall ill or there are class closures due to covid transmission, will Ministers take personal responsibility and do the honourable thing, having precipitated further chaos and disruption to our children's education?

Nick Gibb: The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation has now confirmed that an age-based approach remains the most effective way of reducing death and hospitalisation from covid-19. More than 20 million vaccines have already been given—I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman did not congratulate the Government on that magnificent achievement—but modelling confirms that the speed of vaccine deployment is the most effective and important factor. The JCVI's view is that targeting occupational groups will be more complex to deliver, and may slow down the vaccine programme. Keeping the operation simple and easy to deliver is key to the rapid deployment of the vaccine.

[912736] **Imran Ahmad Khan** (Wakefield) (Con) [V]: I was interested to read the recent report entitled “Back to School—and After” by the Institute of Economic Affairs, which outlines a number of policies that would help to resolve critical issues facing our schools. Summer holidays are a key area, and it appears that they prove counterproductive for pupils, leading to a reduction in learning. I wonder whether the Minister would kindly look at the proposal to restructure the school year to reduce the length of summer holidays—a policy that will greatly benefit pupils and parents.

Gavin Williamson: My hon. Friend raises an important matter. We have asked Sir Kevan Collins to look across a full and broad range of ways of giving children a boost, not just to catch up on any learning that they have lost but more fundamentally, to make major changes to how we drive educational attainment over a generation and more. All of this is something that Sir Kevan will look at.

[912728] **Yvonne Fovargue** (Makerfield) (Lab) [V]: The unionlearn fund has provided access to skills for over 200,000 workers, many of whom previously had few or no qualifications. Will the Secretary of State reconsider the decision to scrap that highly successful programme and fund it through the national skills programme.

Gavin Williamson: No.

[912729] **Siobhain McDonagh** (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I welcome the reopening of schools and the long awaited introduction of school testing, but, with parental consent required, some schools cannot test up to half of their pupils, putting their peers and families at avoidable risk. Given the importance of school testing, should it not be opt out rather than opt in, ensuring that a far greater number of pupils are tested while retaining parents right to choose?

Nick Gibb: We give clear guidance, and we expect parents to give permission to the school to allow secondary school pupils to be tested twice a week. This is an important initiative that helps to minimise the risk of transmission in the secondary school estate. After the first three tests, home testing kits will be sent to homes with pupils, and we hope that the twice-weekly testing of pupils will continue for the foreseeable future.

Mr Speaker: We now go to Amy Callaghan. Can I say how pleased I am to see Amy? Welcome back—it really is good to see you.

Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP) [V]: A heartfelt thank you to everyone who wished me well during my recent illness.

The UK Government's decision to withdraw from Erasmus+ has far-reaching consequences, including for the third sector. Can the Minister guarantee that under the Government's new Turing scheme, charity funding will be matched to that of Erasmus?

Gavin Williamson: Mr Speaker, I join you and, I am sure, all Members of the House in welcoming the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan) back and wishing her the very best.

The Turing scheme offers young people and universities an amazing opportunity to explore amazing opportunities right around the globe, far broader and greater than the Erasmus scheme. I very much hope that universities and the wider education sector—including colleges and schools, which also have access to the Turing scheme as a result of the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020—in Scotland as well as in England, Wales and Northern Ireland will really be able to take advantage of this brilliant opportunity. As I say, I wish the hon. Lady the very best.

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

3.35 pm

Sitting suspended.

Vauxhall at Ellesmere Port and Battery Manufacturing Strategy

3.38 pm

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy if he will make a statement on the future of car manufacturing by Vauxhall at Ellesmere Port and the Government's strategy for battery manufacturing.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kwasi Kwarteng): I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for the great work he did as Secretary of State. He was the first Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, and I think that we can all say that we appreciate the outstanding work he did at that time.

The Government are absolutely committed to ensuring the future of manufacturing at Ellesmere Port and to secure the jobs and livelihoods of the workers at the plant. Since I was appointed Business Secretary last month, I have held a number of meetings with both Vauxhall and its new parent company, Stellantis, to support the company to make a positive investment decision. Only last week, I also held a constructive meeting with the general secretary of Unite, Mr Len McCluskey. Over the coming days and weeks, I, fellow Ministers and officials at BEIS will continue this intensive dialogue with the company.

More widely, the Government are continuing their long-standing programme of support to keep the British automotive sector at the forefront of technology and maintain its competitiveness, building on the work that my right hon. Friend did through the automotive sector deal.

It is my priority as Business Secretary to ensure that the UK continues to enjoy the benefits from our transition to ultra low and zero emission vehicles by continuing to build an agile, innovative and cost-competitive supply chain, which we need to secure vital international investment. With that in mind, we remain dedicated and absolutely committed to securing UK battery manufacturing. As part of the Prime Minister's 10-point plan, we have already announced £500 million to support the electrification of vehicles and their supply chains, and other strategically important technologies, through the automotive transformation fund over the next four years. We continue to work with investors through the automotive transformation fund, and to progress plans for manufacturing the batteries that we will need for the next generation of electric vehicles here in the UK.

The Government and industry have jointly committed almost £1.5 billion through the Advanced Propulsion Centre and Faraday battery challenge to support the research, development and manufacture of zero and low emission technologies. Between 2013 and 2020, the Advanced Propulsion Centre has funded 67 collaborative R&D projects, creating and safeguarding nearly 47,000 jobs, with projected CO₂ savings of 244 million tonnes.

I repeat: we are 100% committed to making sure that the UK continues to be one of the best locations in the world for automotive manufacturing, and we are doing all we can to protect and create jobs while securing a competitive future for the sector here in the UK in particular, including at Ellesmere Port.

Greg Clark: I bring it to the House's attention that I am a vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary motor group and the chemical industry all-party parliamentary group.

I am grateful to the Secretary of State for his response to my urgent question and for his kind words. The industrial strategy made a number of commitments. One was to make Britain a home for vaccine development and to build vaccine manufacturing capability. Another was to make Britain a leading manufacturer of electric vehicles, including the batteries that power them. I mention them both not to claim special prescience, but rather the opposite; both are obviously required if our industrial strengths are to continue in the future.

In the case of electric vehicles, there are three important facts. First, we have one of the most important, diverse and efficient car industries in the world, employing over 800,000 people in all parts of Britain. Secondly, by 2030 no new car will be sold in Britain with simply a petrol or a diesel engine. Thirdly, unless the batteries for vehicles made in the UK are manufactured in Britain within five years, the cars that they power will no longer be able to be exported tariff-free to the EU. We therefore urgently need to install the manufacturing capacity in the UK. That means not just one gigafactory, but many. It all needs to be planned, built and operating at scale within five years.

In the case of Vauxhall at Ellesmere Port, as the Secretary of State says, a decision is imminent as to whether a new electric model will be built there. The same is true of Jaguar Land Rover in the west midlands and supply chain companies such as GKN. A laissez-faire approach will not do it, and neither will just general encouragement. It requires sleeves-rolled-up concrete action to be taken now between Government and industry, just as was the case with vaccines. Will the Secretary of State, for whom I have a high regard, make this commitment today and do whatever it takes urgently to ensure that Britain is a global force in manufacturing electric vehicles long into the future?

Kwasi Kwarteng: My right hon. Friend is quite right. The issues raised by his question are of critical strategic importance, and I fully appreciate the work that he did on driving the industrial strategy. As he pointed out, the industrial strategy set the foundation for vaccines and the success of the vaccine roll-out. He is quite right to point out that we need the same rigour and focus in ensuring that the United Kingdom continues to be an attractive place in which to invest for the manufacture of electric vehicles, in order to meet the Prime Minister's 10-point plan. Electric vehicles were a key part of that 10-point plan.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: I thank the right hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) for securing this urgent question and agree wholeheartedly with him. Labour stands ready to do all we can to secure the future of Ellesmere Port. The plant has been a major employer in the north-west for decades and is highly efficient and productive. It would be a travesty if it did not have a long-term future. That is now in the Government's hands.

The uncertainty facing Ellesmere Port and other car plants speaks to a deeper problem caused by the Government's inaction on automotive. They have been

asleep at the wheel. First, automotive has had no sectoral support during covid, despite the worst trading levels in 50 years, while it has received billions of euros in France and Germany. Secondly—[Inaudible.] The green transition for car makers is not underpinned by any meaningful investment or strategy. They need more than the platitudes of the 10-point plan. They need a world-leading gigafactory plan.

Thirdly, Ministers said that the Brexit deal would unleash Government to back British industry, but it has not. Instead, our EU competitors are unashamedly pumping support into their car makers, while ours are left hamstrung by new red tape. It is no wonder that international companies such as Stellantis are looking at their long-term investments and wanting more from our Government.

What further guarantees can the Secretary of State give to Stellantis and others that he will back the switch to electric with real support? What is he demanding from the Budget for automotive? Will he bring forward plans to create green jobs today by raising his ambition on gigafactories and other infrastructure? Finally, will he actually do whatever it takes to help British industry post Brexit, to ensure the bright future that our businesses and workers deserve?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I do not recognise some of the premises of the hon. Member's question. The Prime Minister's 10-point plan, far from being full of platitudes, is a world beater. I saw a story in *The Guardian* yesterday about the UN saying that other countries are struggling to meet our targets and our performance on decarbonisation and net zero, so I do not recognise that. She is right to suggest that we are 100% focused on securing these vital jobs. We are totally committed to net zero. I was lucky enough to be the energy Minister who landed the energy White Paper—the first energy White Paper that the Government published in 13 years. We are very focused on trying to land investment to drive the green industrial revolution here in this country.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con) [V]: The Secretary of State is fully aware of the remarkable site we have down here in Somerset at Gravity, where we could put not only a megafactory but a battery factory. We would welcome his support for the Gravity site, because it is one of the best sites in the United Kingdom. We have just applied for freeport status as well, to help the situation with Bristol port. Will the Secretary of State stand up and say that this is one of the sites in Britain that should be considered for the very important future of car manufacturing and battery manufacturing in the United Kingdom?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I would be delighted to make a statement that we are considering and looking at these sites. My hon. Friend will know that I have visited Hinkley Point in his constituency and seen the great work there. I have no doubt that the manufacturing skill and competence of his constituents and his area will be able to sustain an excellent gigafactory.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson, Stephen Flynn, who has one minute.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP) [V]: I commend the right hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) for securing this urgent question. The reality is that this

matter depends on two key issues facing the UK right now: the disaster that is the Tory Brexit deal, but also, as has been said, how this Government intend to save and create jobs in the UK while driving through the changes necessary to reduce vehicle emissions.

On Brexit, the mess is clear for all to see. Indeed, the owner of Ellesmere Port said last month that it might make more sense to invest in Europe because “the biggest market is on the continental Europe side”.

The Tories need to own their mess, as indeed does the Labour party, which has happily pushed a deal over the line. Does the Secretary of State now, even grudgingly, accept that the deal is not fit for purpose?

On vehicle emissions, the shift towards electric and, perhaps even more so, hydrogen is vital to deliver the reductions necessary, but we need to ensure that we create a supply chain at home that supports vehicle manufacturers to make an affordable transition. The Secretary of State will likely accept this point, but does he not agree that his Government need to go further and faster in their financial support?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. Gentleman raises two issues. I think the Brexit deal is a success. Given the fact that we had two general elections in that period and five years in which we spoke about nothing other than Brexit, to reach a deal in the time we did was successful, and clearly Nissan committed itself to Sunderland on the back of this very good deal. He is quite right: I think we can go further and faster in driving the transition—the energy transition—and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister's 10-point plan and the energy White Paper, which I have referred to, point the way in that regard.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con) [V]: The rules of origin requirements to continue selling vehicles tariff-free to the EU and the high proportion of the cost of batteries in electric vehicles make providing gigafactories urgent. The Secretary of State will be aware of proposals for the Coventry airport site, which are already at an advanced level. It is close to the UK Battery Industrialisation Centre and it is of course in the historic home of the motor industry, making it an obvious location. Does the Secretary of State agree that this development in Coventry would place the UK at the heart of electric vehicle manufacturing?

Kwasi Kwarteng: Yes, my hon. Friend is quite right. There are lots of sites that have potential in the field of gigafactories, and we remain absolutely committed to securing UK gigafactory capacity. There is a range of factors, as my hon. Friend will appreciate, that will influence the decision of any location of gigafactory investment, but I would be very happy to discuss further plans with him, alongside officials, and have further discussions about our strategic future in this important area.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab) [V]: Last Sunday, my constituents woke up to newspaper headlines saying a decision was due to be made on the future of Vauxhall Motors on Tuesday. Tuesday came and went, and the media speculation increased, but by the end of the week those whose livelihoods depend on the plant were none the wiser. I am sure it is clear to all just how much anxiety all this speculation has generated, but it will be worth it if it focuses the Government's

[Justin Madders]

attention on the urgent need to deliver on a plan to ensure our great British car industry gets all the support it needs to move to electric vehicle production. Does the Secretary of State understand the importance of getting the right decision—not just for the people of Ellesmere Port but for the signal it sends out about where securing the future of the automotive sector stands in the Government's priorities?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I think the hon. Gentleman is quite right. There are two issues here: there is a local issue, and I can only imagine the uncertainty under which the excellent workers in his constituency and at that site are working; and there is of course a national issue. The question we must ask ourselves is whether we are committed to having gigafactories in this country. We are 100% committed to that, and I am very hopeful that we can reach a satisfactory conclusion about the continued investment and support for Stellantis in his constituency.

John Howell (Henley) (Con) [V]: I am grateful for what the Secretary of State has said about the amount of investment being made in batteries, but may I ask him for his support for companies such as those at the Culham Science Centre, which he recently visited, that are undertaking groundbreaking research in batteries, including in aviation?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I am very pleased that my hon. Friend has raised that question. I had an excellent visit a few months ago, as he remembers, in his constituency in Culham. I spoke to many business people who are driving the net zero agenda, and, alongside him, I am very happy to support those efforts.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD) [V]: Increasing demand for electric vehicles can help to create the green jobs that we need, as we transition away from carbon-emitting industries. Will the Secretary of State agree that cutting VAT to 5% on electric vehicles can help to stimulate that demand?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. Lady is right. We are considering many ways to stimulate the demand to drive this critical agenda. It was a big step for the Prime Minister to announce that we would try to phase out the purchase of internal combustion engine cars by 2030. There was some opposition to that, but it was clearly the right move and we are looking at all sorts of other measures to promote the demand that she wants to see.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con) [V]: Many of my constituents make the highly successful Vivaro van at the plant in Luton. Can the Secretary of State say what the Government are doing to encourage electric van manufacture here in the United Kingdom?

Kwasi Kwarteng: That is a critical point. My hon. Friend understands about Stellantis as well, because he refers to the successful plant in Luton. What we want to see is a successful renewed commitment to Ellesmere Port, such as that which is found in Luton. He will know that the fourth point of the Prime Minister's 10-point plan was all about driving up electric vehicle take-up and, obviously, that includes vans.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): It is now clear that the policy of phasing out the production of petrol and diesel cars will have an impact on employment in some areas of the United Kingdom where we have higher than average unemployment. What impact assessment have the Government done on the effect of this policy on revenue from fuel duty? What impact assessment have they done on the environmental impact of the mining of earth metals, one of the dirtiest industries in the world? What impact assessment have they done on the impact on poor families who will now face higher capital costs when it comes to purchasing cars? Would it not be a far more Conservative policy to allow manufacturers and consumers to make the choice as to which cars they make and which cars they drive?

Kwasi Kwarteng: Clearly, the right hon. Gentleman and I may have a different view on the threat of climate change, including, in particular, the drive to net zero. I suggest to him that the Prime Minister's 10-point plan has been well received. There has been huge support across the United Kingdom to see cleaner technology and electric vehicles and many people are very supportive of the Government's measures in this regard.

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con) [V]: Last month, I met representatives from Johnson Matthey, which is opening a new flagship site at Milton Park in my constituency, where it will develop and test advance batches, working both to lengthen the driving distances and shorten the charging times. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this is a very welcome development that supports the Government's ambition to transition us to electric vehicles as well as to help us meet our 2050 net zero goal?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I am delighted to answer that question, because it relates to an earlier answer that I gave. There are new jobs and opportunities in this push towards net zero. I would be very pleased to visit the Johnson Matthey site in Wantage and I think that it is an excellent development that we are all extremely pleased about.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): A thousand jobs are at risk if the Ellesmere Port plant closes, and a further 6,000 in the supply chain. Does the Minister agree that the future of the Vauxhall Ellesmere Port plant and the GKN plant in Birmingham could be secured if the Government commit to investing in a green recovery for the automotive sector to produce a new electric model and, in that way, they could protect thousands of jobs, because actions speak louder than words.

Kwasi Kwarteng: As I said to my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark), the Government are 100% committed to making sure those jobs stay. We are in conversations—negotiations, if they may be called that—with the company. We are also very committed to the Prime Minister's 10-point plan and driving the energy transition, which will have economic impacts, secure jobs and be a great thing not only in the fight against climate change but for the economic development of our country.

Mark Jenkinson (Workington) (Con): The transition to electric vehicles is essential if we are to hit our world-beating commitment of net zero emissions by 2050.

Will my right hon. Friend set out his plans to support the wider roll-out of vehicle charging points in places such as my constituency, where our rurality has necessitated the slower uptake of electric vehicles?

Kwasi Kwarteng: My hon. Friend raises a crucial point. Clearly, without a successful roll-out of charging points we will struggle to meet the targets we have set ourselves. We have committed £90 million already to facilitate the roll-out of larger-scale charge point infrastructure projects across England for local areas, and we will continue to support that. I would be very happy to have a conversation with him about how we can best do that.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab) [V]: The Chair of the Select Committee on Science and Technology could not have been clearer: for the British car industry to succeed in the growing electric vehicle market, protecting thousands of jobs, including here in the midlands, we must have UK gigafactories manufacturing electric batteries by the time the rules of origin change. How many UK gigafactories will we have by 2024? What specific steps is the Secretary of State taking to secure them?

Kwasi Kwarteng: As the hon. Lady will have seen from these questions, we are looking at a number of sites. We are absolutely committed to having at least one gigafactory site, if not more—I think we need more than one—before the next election. I could not be clearer about our commitment to the transition and ultimately to reaching net zero by 2050.

Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con) [V]: I am sure my right hon. Friend will agree that the best sites for gigafactories are those where the automotive sector is strong, transport connections are good and battery technology development is already a feature of the local economy. In that regard, I am entirely with my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) in saying that the Coventry airport site is an excellent one—coincidentally, it is, despite its name, in my constituency. My right hon. Friend would be very welcome to visit at any point, and I am grateful for his encouraging words about it. May I ask him also to accept that sites, however good, are no good without occupants? Will he use the resources he has talked about, and his time and that of his officials, to identify the right sites early and work with those promoting them to secure occupants—companies that manufacture batteries on site—as soon as we can?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I am happy to give my right hon. and learned Friend that assurance—that is exactly what we are trying to do. We are talking to local communities and local leaders about various sites up and down the country where we can site gigafactories. I am very conscious of the fact that Coventry, given its history and that of the midlands, would be an excellent place in which such a factory could be located.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab) [V]: For half a century, the GKN plant in Erdington has manufactured world-class components—the drive shafts and the prop shafts—for our 800,000-strong automotive industry. Melrose, which took over GKN three years ago, has now announced its intention to close the Erdington

plant and to export the 519 highly skilled jobs in the plant to continental Europe, in breach of assurances given at the time of takeover. Will the Secretary of State, who has agreed to meet us on Thursday of this week, work with us—the workforce, their union, Unite, and myself—on alternatives to closure? Any strategy for the transformation of the industry to an electric future will vitally require high-value components, and those high-value components should be built here in Britain.

Kwasi Kwarteng: I recall that I gave that pledge during questions on the Floor of the House, and I am delighted that I will be seeing the hon. Gentleman, and others, on Thursday, to see what can be done on this critical issue.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con) [V]: I draw the House's attention to my role as chair of the all-party group for critical minerals. All the batteries for these electric vehicles will require a reliable supply of critical minerals, particularly lithium. The Secretary of State will be aware that a significant deposit of lithium has been identified in Cornwall, and its commercial extraction is being developed by two companies. Will he confirm that the Government recognise the huge potential benefit to the UK of having a secure domestic supply of lithium? Does he agree that it would make sense for battery manufacturing to be located as close as possible to the extraction and processing of lithium, and will he meet me to discuss the potential opportunity of a gigafactory being built in Cornwall?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the potential siting of a gigafactory. He will appreciate that through the getting building fund the Government have already committed to supporting a lithium extraction pilot plant in Cornwall, and our Faraday battery challenge already supports work to find and use lithium across the United Kingdom. This is a critical issue. We fully understand the importance of the security of the supply chain, and I would be happy to discuss that, and more specific Cornwall-related issues, with my hon. Friend at a time convenient to us both.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab) [V]: The Secretary of State mentioned his 10-point plan a number of times, but that will not mean much unless the Government support existing manufacturing, including Vauxhall at Ellesmere Port. Will he do whatever it takes for Cheshire and Merseyside, and Vauxhall in particular, rather than just talking about it, so that low-carbon vehicles really can be made in Britain?

Kwasi Kwarteng: We are talking about it—we are talking with the company directly to secure vital investment. We want those jobs, and we have said time and again that we are 100% committed to the energy transition and to having world-class automotive manufacturing in the UK.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con) [V]: A key component of battery manufacturing is rare metals. Will my right hon. Friend outline what support he is giving to British businesses that seek to harvest polyhalite nodules from our sea bed?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The Government are committed to exploring opportunities that will support the next generations of clean technologies, and we are looking very much at the field of critical raw materials. My hon.

[Kwasi Kwarteng]

Friend will remember that when I was Minister for Business, Energy, and Clean Growth, I was particularly committed to that form of technology. It is an exciting development, admittedly in its early stages, and I am always looking to drive innovation in that area.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab) [V]: I support everything that my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), said about this, and specifically about the impact of this issue on people in our area, and I support what he said about needing to move quickly. Whatever the strategy or plan, it must be about jobs and opportunities, particularly for young people who could be facing a serious unemployment situation. What discussion has the Secretary of State had with the metro Mayor for Merseyside about how we ensure that, whatever the plan is for automotive, it has the fortunes of young people at its heart?

Kwasi Kwarteng: On the specific question, I have met Steve Rotherham a number of times in previous ministerial roles, and I believe I am setting up a meeting with him soon. He has great knowledge of the area, and is interested not only in Ellesmere Port but in the possibilities of the HyNet industrial cluster, and decarbonising that. I am sure I will speak to the Mayor very soon.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): I appreciate that I am the fifth Member to stand up and ask for it, but as regards the gigafactories, my right hon. Friend should look no further than Redcar and Cleveland. In Teesside we have a fantastic workforce. May I invite him to come to Redcar and Cleveland to see a potential site for a gigafactory?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I would be delighted. I am clearly going to be a much-travelled Secretary of State investigating all these potential sites for gigafactories. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the excellent work that he has done in his short time in the House of Commons. He has really made an impact and got his voice heard, and the people of Redcar are very well served. I would be very happy to visit the constituency, as I have done in the past, to look at the opportunities for the energy transition.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): The workforce and the management at Ellesmere Port have done everything that has been asked of them to keep that plant productive and efficient, but as my hon. Friend and next-door neighbour the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) said, they are on tenterhooks waiting for a decision. I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) for his excellent opening remarks. When he was Secretary of State, he kept all the parties involved, including MPs and the local council, Cheshire West and Chester. Will the Secretary of State do the same? We want to help him to get the right results?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I really appreciate those words of support and help. This is a cross-national issue and a cross-party issue, and I would be very happy to engage with the hon. Gentleman. He knows that I have already made a commitment to visit the HyNet industrial cluster near his constituency. I am very much committed,

as previous Secretaries of State have been, to doing all I can to make sure that we get the right investment and the right result.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con) [V]: The Secretary of State will be familiar with my long-standing ambition to see a battery valley—or a battery vale—established in Wales, so I was delighted when Britishvolt prioritised St Athan in the Vale of Glamorgan, my constituency, as its preferred site for its gigafactory, although I was later disappointed when it decided to shift its priority elsewhere, possibly because of the lack of capacity or expertise within the Welsh Government in order to serve its needs in bringing such a large, major investment project to Wales. Does my right hon. Friend agree that his Department needs to play an active role in co-ordinating such large, complicated investment projects for the UK, wherever they may be in any nation within the UK, so that my constituency will not necessarily lose out as it has now?

Kwasi Kwarteng: There are huge opportunities in Wales for the siting of gigafactories, and also, particularly, in terms of the net zero challenge. I spoke to Ken Skates of the Welsh Government only this morning. There is a huge appetite in Wales to drive the net zero agenda. I would be very happy, as my right hon. Friend knows, to have a conversation with him on how best we can work together to do that.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab) [V]: I have listened very carefully to the Secretary of State's responses with regard to Vauxhall's Ellesmere Port plant, but I am sure that my constituents who work there would really like some detail from him, so could he provide us with some details about the actions that he will take to secure the future of their jobs and the thousands of jobs in the local supply chain?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I am fully aware and conscious of the difficult time that we are going through, but the hon. Lady will appreciate that these are ongoing conversations—ongoing sensitive negotiations—and I am not going to be prepared to enter into the details on the Floor of the House. Once we have reached a decision—a conclusion—with the company, we can then have a fuller discussion. I am very committed to landing the right result in this conversation.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con) [V]: JLR is leading the way in committing to an all-electric future, boosting our strong manufacturing base in the west midlands, so it was disappointing that Labour discounted the west midlands from its plans. Will my right hon. Friend demonstrate his superior judgment by backing the campaign by west midlands Conservative MPs and our fantastic Mayor, Andy Street, for a west midlands gigafactory so that the west midlands truly can be the engine for growth?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I am not sure whether that was a yes or no question, but yes to my hon. Friend's point. Andy is doing a great job. MPs in the region, my right hon. and hon. Friends, are really driving progress in this area. I would be very happy to help them and support them in that endeavour.

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab) [V]: Having spent 27 years on the shop floor of Vauxhall in the paint shop and as a union convenor, I am just one of the thousands of people who have benefited from the highly skilled work and training opportunities that the plant has provided over its many decades in operation. By making the necessary investment now, the Government would be able to secure vital employment opportunities for generations to come and help to make the UK a world leader in the production of electric vehicles. Does the Secretary of State accept that not doing so would, frankly, undermine the Government's commitment to a green recovery and betray the very communities the Prime Minister has promised to level up?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I think the hon. Gentleman is quite right. Levelling up is clearly heart and centre of what the Government are trying to do. We are doing all we can to get the right result for the people of Ellesmere Port and also for the UK. It is a hugely significant investment.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that we not only need additional battery capacity but battery recycling facilities, so we can sustainably re-use the batteries and, if necessary, dispose of them?

Kwasi Kwarteng: My hon. Friend is quite right. The UK Government are absolutely committed not only to the manufacturing of these critically important batteries, but to recycling. We want to see a circular economy for electric vehicles. If we attain that, we will surely maximise the economic and environmental opportunities of the transition to zero emission vehicles.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP) [V]: We of course welcome ending new petrol and diesel car sales by 2030, but we are dismayed by the absence of a UK Government strategy to support the industry to transition, meaning that this factory's business model is under threat.

More widely, we have heard great rhetoric from this Government on electric vehicles, but the action is lagging. For example, we have seen nothing from the £3 billion zero emission bus fund, while the Scottish Government power ahead. When will a sustainable strategy be delivered to support factories like Ellesmere Port to not only survive but thrive?

Kwasi Kwarteng: We are absolutely committed to that. When I was energy Minister, people like the hon. Member were saying, "When is the energy White Paper going to come out? What is the plan?" We have a 10-point plan, which has been widely accepted and welcomed. We also have an energy White Paper that sets out the path and we are developing strategies for how we get to net zero at a record pace. The Government are delivering. We have a very clear direction, and the industry has broadly welcomed that.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Existing electric vehicle batteries are too big, have a too limited range and take too long to recharge. I welcome the Government's £318 million investment in the Faraday battery challenge. Will the Secretary of State tell the House how the Faraday battery challenge will lead to smaller batteries with a longer range that do not take very long to recharge?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The Faraday battery challenge is a key part of the industrial strategy, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) had a key role in implementing. It has made extraordinary progress in the past two or three years. I would be very happy to pick this issue up with my hon. Friend. Over the next 10 years, I think we will see a complete transformation in the battery technology he talks about.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): As a proud electric car owner, I am glad that to support our automotive manufacturing industry and to boost its competitiveness, Labour has called for an ambitious investment in electric vehicle technology, including the electric battery supply chain, through a £30 billion green economic recovery. Does the Secretary of State agree that that strategic investment would support manufacturers like Vauxhall and give them the long-term confidence they need to build new electric models right here in the UK?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I agree with a lot of what the hon. Gentleman says. What I would say, and how I would slightly re-tilt the emphasis, is that there is Government investment, which we have—and we are committed to £12 billion through the 10-point plan—but also private investment. If we look at the success of offshore wind, we see that it was driven largely by the investment of private capital. Exactly the same thing will happen in respect of the net zero challenge. That is why we are in conversations with the private company to secure that investment.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con) [V]: One of this Government's priorities is to protect and support jobs and livelihoods across the country as we recover from the pandemic. With Dudley and the Black Country having a pivotal role in the car manufacturing supply chain, will my right hon. Friend confirm that supporting the automotive sector and boosting battery cell manufacturing is an integral part of our plans to build back better and greener from the pandemic?

Kwasi Kwarteng: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Midlands, the Black Country and his constituency are a key part of this story. I have mentioned the 10-point plan many times. It was launched only in November—four months ago—and it has really set the path and set the direction in this area. He is absolutely right: we are 100% committed to success, and I hope that he and his constituents will benefit greatly—I am sure they will—from the transition to a greener and cleaner economy.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab) [V]: Vauxhall has made cars and vans in my constituency since 1903. The plant's loyal and efficient workforce and the Unite union reps have worked flexibly with the company over many years to maintain production at that site, including of the successful Vivaro electric van.

The continued and future success of electric vehicle manufacture, including good skilled jobs for my constituents, is reliant not only on battery production and gigafactories but on investment in rapid charging infrastructure, so will the Secretary of State confirm the Government's commitment to securing investment in this much-needed green infrastructure?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. I pay tribute particularly to the hard work of her constituents to make the Vivaro vehicles; they have ensured that the Vauxhall plant in Luton has been a great success. It is exactly because of that, among other reasons, that we are keenly committed to making sure that Ellesmere Port enjoys equal support and success.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con) [V]: This Government have shown a welcome commitment to bringing electric vehicle production to the UK, with all the benefits to the economy and the environment that that entails, and I hope that we will have that in Rother Valley.

However, electric vehicle components are different from those of petrol and diesel cars and include rare minerals, such as cobalt, that are mined overseas. What discussions has the Secretary of State held about developing a strategy for sourcing rare minerals in an environmentally sustainable and ethical way, particularly by supporting domestic extraction and imports from our safe, reliable, democratic allies?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I commend my hon. Friend for that question, which is of great importance. As I have said in earlier answers, we are absolutely committed to exploring and developing lithium mining here in the UK. We fully understand the threats, or dangers, to the supply chain.

My hon. Friend will also appreciate that the Faraday battery challenge, which we have mentioned a number of times, is funding research to reduce our dependency on raw mineral supply and make better use of global resources. That obviously will involve looking at how we can reduce and replace critical raw materials.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab) [V]: As chair of the all-party parliamentary motor group and the APPG on electric vehicles, I am afraid I have to say that the Government have been slow to move on this, particularly by comparison with the Governments of Germany and France, in attracting investment in battery gigafactories. In addition, through the pandemic, vehicle manufacturers have received consumer support to encourage sales in those countries.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) is leading the charge to attract private sector investment in a gigafactory in Coventry. Does the Secretary of State not see and support that move? It would supply both Luton and Ellesmere Port, but also Halewood and the Jaguar Land Rover factories in the midlands. Would that not be a great outcome?

Kwasi Kwarteng: It would be a great outcome, and I am not going to make a partisan point about it. There are MPs of different political stripes across the

hon. Gentleman's region, as we have seen in these questions, who are very keen to develop this kind of technology.

I am always very happy to engage with colleagues across the House in order to get the right outcomes. It is not just a question of the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne); there are MPs in his area across the House representing midlands seats very ably, and I am very happy to engage with them on this.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Happy St David's day, Mr Speaker. If you will indulge me, may I thank you on the record for the letter that my wife and I received on the birth of our son, Henry? He was a month old yesterday, and I am pleased to say that he is thriving.

Mr Speaker: You are looking well!

Chris Elmore: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Dare I say that face make-up keeps me going?

The Secretary of State has had lots of bids from Members across the House, from all parties, on battery development. I think that I can go one better. On 10 February, the Prime Minister announced to the House that Bridgend would have a world-beating battery development plant; it was later clarified by No. 10 that perhaps the Prime Minister misspoke or mixed up his Bs—Bridgend and Blyth, two very different parts of the country.

May I ask the Secretary of State whether he would agree to meet me and, indeed, the hon. Member for Bridgend (Dr Wallis), to discuss the options for a battery plant for the Bridgend borough? My constituents have lost the Jaguar Land Rover contract with Ford, which has now gone, and Ineos has run away to France with the Brexiteer who runs that company, so we need the Government to look at bringing in real investment to keep those highly skilled jobs in my borough.

Kwasi Kwarteng: My view is that that issue, which is critical for the United Kingdom, is something on which I am willing and happy to engage with Members across the House of Commons. It is too important an issue for narrowly partisan views, and of course I am happy to meet the hon. Gentleman and discuss opportunities to drive investment to power the net zero transition.

Mr Speaker: The Secretary of State has had a lot of requests—I will put Chorley on his list as well.

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

4.26 pm

Sitting suspended.

Covid-19: Ethnic Minority Disparities

4.30 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab) [V] (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Minister for Equalities if she will make a statement on her second quarterly report to the Prime Minister and Health Secretary on progress to understand and tackle covid-19 disparities experienced by individuals from an ethnic minority background.

The Minister for Equalities (Kemi Badenoch): On Friday, I published my second quarterly report summarising the progress the Government have made in understanding and tackling covid-19 disparities experienced by ethnic minority groups. In my first report of 22 October, I concluded that ethnicity in its own right did not appear to be a factor in the disproportionately higher infection and mortality rates among ethnic minority groups. Rather, the evidence showed that a range of socioeconomic and geographical factors were responsible. The evidence base continues to grow.

The early second-wave data shows very different outcomes for different ethnic groups. In the first wave, for instance, black African men were four and a half times more likely to die from covid-19 than white British men of the same age, but in the early part of the second wave the risk of death was the same for both groups. The second wave has, however, had a much greater impact on some south Asian groups, driven primarily by differences in exposure and infection. This strengthens the argument that ethnic minorities should not be viewed as a single group in relation to covid-19 and means that our response to the pandemic and to the disproportionate impact that it has had on certain groups will continue to be shaped by the latest evidence.

The other major development since my first report is the approval of three covid-19 vaccines and the subsequent roll-out of the vaccination programme, with more than 20 million of those most at risk vaccinated so far. Confidence in the vaccine among ethnic minority groups is key, and my latest report summarises our efforts over the last quarter to tackle misinformation and promote uptake.

The report also sets out the extensive measures taken across central and local government to tackle covid-19 disparities, including the release in January of £23.75 million in funding to local authorities under the community champions scheme and a further £4.5 million in funding for four new research projects looking at the health, social, cultural and economic impacts of covid-19 on ethnic minority groups.

To conclude, my report outlines a number of next steps with this work and I will update the Prime Minister on progress at the end of the next quarter.

Marsha De Cordova [V]: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. We know that covid-19 has had a devastating and disproportionate impact on our black, Asian and ethnic minority communities. In the second wave, Bangladeshi and Pakistani people have been three times more likely to die, so my first question is to ask the Minister what steps the Government are taking to protect these groups.

I agree with the Minister that the term “BAME” has been unhelpful in assessing the impact of the virus. However, I do not agree with her conclusion that ethnicity

is not a risk factor for covid-19, as in reality ethnicity risk factors cannot be separated from the socioeconomic risk factors. For example, ethnic minorities are more likely to live in overcrowded and intergenerational homes where they are unable to self-isolate effectively. What action is being taken to address this issue, especially as schools are set to return next week?

The vaccine roll-out offers hope, but take-up remains low among our ethnic minorities. The Minister’s report rightly lists misinformation and disinformation as contributing factors, but fails to address the mistrust and long-standing health inequalities faced by some ethnic minority communities. What actions are being taken to tackle issues of historical mistrust? We need localised data from those who choose not to take the vaccine so that we can effectively target those people, so when will that data finally be published?

Funding for community champions is welcome, but why have only two of the five most diverse local authorities in the UK received funding? Will she work with her Cabinet colleagues to ensure that the most diverse areas receive funding to increase take-up? The Minister rightly states that a one-size-fits-all approach cannot be used. What changes can we expect to see from this Government? Will she publish equality impact assessments on pandemic responses, including vaccine uptake? Finally, when can we expect to see the delayed report from the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities so that we can help to create the more equal society that we all desire?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank the hon. Lady for her questions, and I will try to address each of them. She mentioned what the Government are doing to assist south Asian groups, where the numbers and the impact appear to be increasing. We have taken a number of steps to mitigate the impact of covid-19 on these groups, including targeting those occupations with larger Pakistani and Bangladeshi workforces. For example, we issued new guidance to private hire vehicle and taxi drivers in November—updated in January—about how to protect themselves from covid-19. Working with religious leaders and others, we have taken steps to promote vaccine uptake among these groups, including housing vaccination centres in mosques and other places of worship. The race disparity unit and No. 10 recently held roundtables with representatives from south Asian groups on how to promote vaccine uptake.

The data is changing every day, so we try to make sure that we have a clearer picture before we base any actions and recommendations on what is coming out. This is likely to be a dynamic situation, but I will continue to update the House as we know more.

I can tell the hon. Lady that the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities is due to report imminently. It is an independent commission, so I cannot control exactly when it submits its findings, but I have had regular updates from the chair, and I know it is finalising recommendations and I expect the report shortly.

The hon. Lady also mentioned the recording of ethnicity. I am pleased to tell her that data on ethnicity is now being published. It was first published on 28 January, based on the availability and quality of data. On the point of equality impact assessments, she does know that they are based on the information provided to Departments, and it is up to them to decide what they do, but we do not routinely publish equality impact assessments.

[Kemi Badenoch]

The hon. Lady asked specifically about vaccine uptake, and I can tell her that I wrote to the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation, which is determining the prioritisation with the findings from our report. I know that this issue is being taken into account, along with the covid prioritisation tool, so the information is in the public domain and does not require an equality impact assessment to know.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con) [V]: My hon. Friend is right to point out that we need to have trusted voices and community champions promoting the roll-out of the vaccine and vaccine uptake. We know that there is a higher excess mortality risk for south Asian women, so can I ask my hon. Friend whether she is making sure that we also reach out to female voices in communities, including organisations such as the Muslim Women's Network UK, to make sure that they are playing a part in increasing the uptake of vaccines?

Kemi Badenoch: My right hon. Friend is right to point out that we should not assume that community organisations, which might be male-dominated, are reaching female members of ethnic minority groups, and I will ensure that we continue to work on that. I will check with officials to ensure that the groups she has mentioned are included in the ones we are providing advice and guidance to and are liaising with.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP) [V]: There is clear evidence of both higher covid-19 infection and higher mortality rates among people from ethnic minority backgrounds, as well as greater pandemic-related economic damage affecting these diverse groups. I also know from my own constituency that the no recourse to public funds policy locks many people, including children, out of vital support. Will the Minister urge her colleagues in the UK Government to review this damaging and discriminatory policy, which has such a disproportionate impact on BAME families?

Debate on economic inequality is often undermined by a lack of reliable data. Will the Minister follow the recommendations of the Women and Equalities Committee and publish proposals for the introduction of ethnicity and disability pay gap reporting? Will she also back calls for equality impact assessments to be published for the coronavirus job retention scheme and the self-employment income support scheme, as well as the introduction of redundancy pay gap reporting by protected characteristics?

Kemi Badenoch: With regard to the support that the Government are providing to those who have no recourse to public funds, many of the wide-ranging covid-19 measures that the Government have put in place are available to migrants with no recourse to public funds, such as the coronavirus job retention scheme, the self-employment income support scheme and support allowances that are not classed as public funds. In addition, we temporarily extended free school meals to include some groups who have no recourse to public funds. As I have said to the hon. Lady's Scottish National party colleagues, and probably to her as well, it is really important that we do not conflate ethnic minorities with recent migrants; they are two completely distinct

groups and it is wrong to mix them up in this way. We are ensuring that we are providing support to those who are most vulnerable and who need it most.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con) [V]: I welcome my hon. Friend's recent report and all that she is doing. Will she join me in recognising the role of local community leadership in addressing these differences in vaccine take-up? For instance, in my own community, Grace Powell from Basingstoke Caribbean Society, Kishor Patel from Basingstoke Hindu Society and Poonam Gurung from Basingstoke Nepalese Community are all publicly advocating vaccination as the best way to keep the whole community safe.

Kemi Badenoch: My right hon. Friend raises a very good point. I congratulate all of her constituents who are doing important work in the community by raising awareness of what is happening with covid-19, and ensuring that people have access to the best advice and guidance. It is critical that we continue to support those community champions. That is one of the reasons that we are funding the community champions scheme, which ensures that we improve the reach of official public health guidance and other messaging or communications about the virus into those hard-to-reach areas.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD) [V]: In the year to September 2020, the drop in employment for people from ethnic minorities was 26 times higher than for white workers. Unless the Government take meaningful action to address workforce inequalities, including the ethnicity pay gap, the fall-out from covid will make these glaring inequalities even worse. May I ask again: will the Government finally commit to bringing forward the long-awaited ethnicity pay gap reporting?

Kemi Badenoch: I believe that we have answered this question before; if memory serves me correctly, I think I have written to the hon. Lady on this subject. It is something that the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities is looking at. The commission will be reporting shortly and will be able to give a statement on ethnicity pay reporting. I would like the hon. Lady to send me her statistics about workforce inequality; they are not statistics with which I am familiar, and it would be very interesting to look at the evidence base on that.

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): The vaccine roll-out is the best tool in our fight against covid-19, and we must do all we can to ensure that there are no racial disparities in its uptake. This Saturday, I was lucky enough to visit Keighley central mosque, where 525 vaccinations were delivered on that day alone. Will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating all those involved, particularly Mohammed Nazam from Keighley Muslim Association, and the Modality Partnership, for all their efforts to ensure that everyone is protected against covid-19?

Kemi Badenoch: I agree with my hon. Friend, and add my congratulations to Keighley Muslim Association on its success, and particularly to Mohammed Nazam. Working with religious leaders and others to promote vaccine uptake among ethnic minorities, including housing vaccination centres in mosques and other places of worship, is important to ensure that we achieve good vaccine coverage within these groups. The NHS has now opened

47 vaccination sites in places of worship and community centres, as this boosts perceptions of vaccine safety and improves access. High-profile visits to these sites have a huge impact on the faith community being visited.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab) [V]: Polling by HOPE not hate found that black people were more likely than any other group to blame a previous bad experience with the health system as justification for not wanting the vaccine. What steps will the Minister take to build trust in black communities who have experienced structural racism in the health system?

Kemi Badenoch: The Government are doing everything they can to improve vaccine confidence and reduce vaccine hesitancy. Vaccines are the best way to protect people from coronavirus and save thousands of lives, and we want every eligible person to benefit from the offer of a free vaccine, no matter their ethnicity or religious beliefs.

The Department of Health and Social Care and the NHS are working closely with black, Asian and minority ethnic communities to support those receiving a vaccine. As part of that, we are working with faith and community leaders to give them advice and information about the universal benefits of vaccination and how their communities can get a vaccine. That has incorporated many activities. Most recently, as the hon. Gentleman will probably be aware, the Minister for Covid Vaccine Deployment requested a cross-party video for black MPs, so that we can show that we as parliamentarians believe that this is important, and I have promoted that in my role as Minister for Equalities.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con) [V]: Does the Minister agree that vaccines are the best way for people from ethnic minority backgrounds to protect themselves from the harmful effects of covid? Can she update us on the latest work that her Department is doing to support that?

Kemi Badenoch: I can. We must stress that there is light at the end of the tunnel, and as the vaccine roll-out continues, I urge everyone who is offered one to take the opportunity to protect themselves, their family and their community. It is important that we tackle misinformation in particular. Across Government, we are spending tens of millions of pounds on public health communications, and my hon. Friend will have seen a significant increase in public vaccine communications. The NHS website remains the most trusted health website, and the counter-disinformation unit is rebutting false information, especially where the intent is malicious or dangerous to public health. I thank him for raising this issue.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab) [V]: The Minister is insistent that the wildly disproportionate rate of infection and death among black, Asian and minority ethnic communities has nothing to do with the fact that they are black, Asian or from a minority ethnic group. Has it occurred to her that the fact that they are more likely to be in overcrowded, poor housing conditions and in the types of job that leave them liable to infection is not random, but is to do with race and ethnicity?

Will the Minister do more in the area of data? First, will she speak to colleagues about having ethnicity routinely put on death certificates? Can we have more information on the Haredi and ultra-orthodox Jewish

communities, who have had disproportionate levels of deaths from covid in America? Will she speak to Public Health England to make sure that local directors of public health make constituency-level data, particularly on ethnicity, available to constituency stakeholders, including Members of Parliament?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank the right hon. Lady for her question. I wish that she had actually read my reports, because she would have seen that I addressed that not just in the October report, but in the one that came out last week. Recording ethnicity data on death certificates was one of the recommendations in my previous report. It is not something that can be done overnight—it will probably require legislation—but we are on our way to getting it, so that is some good news.

The right hon. Lady also mentioned the orthodox Jewish community—finally someone from the Labour Benches has talked about this community, and I am very pleased that she has. Research from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine estimated that 64% of the orthodox Jewish community may have had covid-19 in 2020. The researchers said that the reasons behind this high rate of infection are not yet known.

Strictly orthodox families have significantly larger households than the UK average. They also live in areas of increased population density and, in pre-pandemic times, had regular attendance at communal events and gatherings. I use them as an example because this is why it is wrong for us to mix together lots of different groups. The orthodox Jewish community has been more impacted than many of the ethnic minority groups that get a lot of attention in the press, but we do not say that that is due to structural antisemitism. We look at the underlying factors. Where there are multi-generational households, for instance, that is not due to racism, but is often due to cultural factors. We are not going to take grandparents away from their families because of covid. We are going to provide them with guidance to ensure that they can look after themselves safely; that is this Government's priority.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con) [V]: I commend my hon. Friend on the outstanding job that she is doing in encouraging the whole population take the vaccine when they are offered it, because that is so important. In an article on LabourList on 19 February reflecting on covid-19, Labour's shadow Equalities Minister, the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), claimed that Government Ministers continue to dismiss and deny "the realities of racism", and went on to state that "structural racism" was the cause of those disparities. What is the Government's view on this question?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank my hon. Friend for the question, and for the opportunity to reiterate what I said to the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova). Of course racism exists; no one in this Government has ever denied the existence of racism. In fact, I have spoken about my personal experience, as did the Home Secretary at this very Dispatch Box—and 30 Labour MPs, including the hon. Lady, dismissed the Home Secretary's experiences as gaslighting. However, we will not assume that every issue experienced by ethnic minorities is caused by racism without looking at the evidence. We develop solutions

[Kemi Badenoch]

based on where the evidence leads, unlike Labour, whose report in October recommended that we decolonise the curriculum to address covid-19.

There is a legitimate debate to be had on how we tackle racism and address ethnic disparities, but although our means of achieving these goals may differ, that should in no way undermine our shared commitment to building a fairer and more cohesive society. Let me be clear to those who have either misunderstood or deliberately choose to misrepresent what the Government have said: this Government condemn racism, an evil which has no place in a civilised society.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con) [V]: Aylesbury mosque is working extremely hard to spread accurate messages and dispel fake news about the vaccine, both at Friday prayers and on its Facebook page. Will my hon. Friend join me in thanking the Aylesbury mosque committee for these efforts and for showing this leadership, and does she agree that faith groups have a crucial role to play in telling the truth and encouraging take-up of the vaccine across all parts of our community?

Kemi Badenoch: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I add my thanks to the Aylesbury mosque for its vital work in promoting vaccine uptake. Working with religious leaders and other respected local voices to promote vaccine uptake among ethnic minorities is key to ensuring that we reach all parts of the community. As I mentioned, the NHS has now opened 47 vaccination sites in places of worship and community centres across the country, and it is fantastic to get feedback from local MPs on how this is going.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP) [V]: The Joint Committee on Human Rights has heard evidence that BAME communities, as well as being under-protected from covid, have been over-policed. This is evidenced by a considerable disparity in the number of fixed-penalty notices issued to BAME people over white people in England and Wales. Will the Minister consider including inequality of policing outcomes as well as health outcomes in her quarterly reports?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank the hon. and learned Lady for her question. Inequality of policing outcomes, I am afraid, is outside the remit of this report. We are looking purely from a health perspective at the disproportionate impact of covid-19, but I take the point that she made, and I think she will find that we will talk about this shortly, when the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities reports, because it has been looking at these specific issues.

Imran Ahmad Khan (Wakefield) (Con) [V]: Unlike some detractors, I have read the latest covid disparities report, which has been endorsed by clinicians and epidemiologists and is testament to my hon. Friend's efforts in leading and driving the agenda forward, but naturally there is still more to do. Will she ensure that, as we unlock with our road map, we retain a focus on the groups who have been most disproportionately impacted by the second wave?

Kemi Badenoch: Yes, I can confirm that to my hon. Friend. The Government are looking at the most vulnerable and those who need our protection, not just in the context of covid-19, but more widely. To tackle unfairness in our society, we are looking at how we can open up opportunities to everyone, no matter their class, ethnicity or background. It is not a case of choosing one group over another. We want equality for everyone, everywhere. The work that we will do in the Government Equalities Office following the report from the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities will continue to address the structural issues that I know many Members are concerned about.

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Given the greater risk factors that mean that black women are four times more likely to die in childbirth than white women, what accountability mechanisms has the Minister put in place to monitor and evaluate the success of the pilot schemes to address the inequalities mentioned in the report? How will she guarantee that these pilots can be rolled out across the country, so that maternal mortality does not become a postcode lottery for black women?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I know that Health Ministers are taking this issue seriously; it is something that cuts across our briefs. I have taken a particular interest because of my own experience of having three children within the maternal health sector. Following a joint ministerial roundtable in September 2020, the race disparity unit, which reports to me, has been supporting the Department of Health and Social Care in driving positive actions in maternity services to improve outcomes for ethnic minority women. That includes the recently launched NHS campaign "Help us help you", which informs pregnant women about the importance of attending check-ups, and provides reassurance that the NHS is there to see them safely, because covid has affected the way that maternity works in the NHS. We are hoping that as we continue to unlock and come out of this, things will go back to normal.

Kate Griffiths (Burton) (Con) [V]: We all know that vaccination is imperative for protecting lives and for economic recovery. I am therefore concerned about the low vaccination take-up among the BAME community. In Burton, there is a campaign targeted at reaching anyone from the BAME community who should have been vaccinated but has not, and a pop-up vaccination clinic has been arranged for this Friday at a local mosque. May I urge my hon. Friend to ensure that resources are available for further work to reach out to those communities and ensure more clinics in communities where take-up is low?

Kemi Badenoch: We are ensuring that public health messages are accessible, and are published in a large number of media that ethnic minorities read, watch and listen to. That will be critical in ensuring that the message gets to all communities, especially those that are harder to reach. I am pleased to hear about the vaccination efforts in Burton, and that local mosques are being used. This is a good time to re-emphasise that local efforts will be key in driving vaccine uptake. It cannot all be done from Whitehall and Westminster. We are delivering communication on the channels that we

believe people from ethnic minorities use, and are communicating through individuals such as religious and community leaders, as I have mentioned. The DHSC has also set up regular interviews with clinicians for more than 20 ethnic minority newspapers and programmes, including *The Voice*, BBC Asian Network, Al Jazeera, British Muslim TV, Zee TV, *Hamodia* and the *Jewish Chronicle*.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister in her report highlights that there is £4.5 million of Government money to invest in research, including on the economic impacts on ethnic minority groups. With so many frontline workers having been removed from their posts for their own protection—that is the right move—is any of that money being spent on looking at the impact on their career paths of their having lost out on opportunities?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank the hon. Lady for that question. I recall having this discussion just before October, in relation to my previous report. I specifically raised with DHSC colleagues the point that people who are being removed from the frontline because of their risk should not have any career impacts. I can write to her with the full details. I cannot recollect off the top of my head where we ended up, but I know that I have an answer for her.

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con) [V]: I recently held a virtual vaccine roundtable in Carshalton and Wallington with NHS leaders such as Dr Anu Jacob, Arlene Wellman and Nadine Wyatt, and community leaders such as Councillor Lily Bande, Councillor Param Nandha and Mukesh Rao, to encourage everyone, including ethnic minority groups, to get the vaccine, and it was a great success. I welcome the Government's work to communicate the benefits of getting a covid vaccine to hard-to-reach groups, but could my hon. Friend assure me that we will continue to support community leaders to ensure that the message gets through to every single part of our communities?

Kemi Badenoch: Yes, I can assure my hon. Friend of that. It is what I responded to my hon. Friend the Member for Burton (Kate Griffiths), and I can reiterate it again now. What I would also say is that we want to assess the effectiveness of the scheme, so it is not just about letting people know that it has happened, but about checking that what we are doing and what we think is happening is working. Participating local authorities will provide regular progress reports over the course of the community champions programme, for example, so that we can evaluate exactly what is going on. One of the next steps in my report is to share the learning from the programme and to maximise the benefits from the funding we have given so that everyone, including those who have not participated in the scheme, can benefit.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab) [V]: When I challenged the Minister on the disproportionate impact of covid-19 on black and minority ethnic groups after the first wave of the virus, the Minister denied that systemic injustice was to blame. This new report shows that, in the second wave, Bangladeshi and Pakistani people were three times more likely to die from covid, and that black and minority ethnic communities as a whole are

still significantly disproportionately in critical care with it. Does the Minister now acknowledge that it is systemic injustice that black and minority ethnic communities face from higher rates of poverty and overcrowded housing to higher rates of frontline work and barriers to accessing healthcare?

Kemi Badenoch: I think it is a really interesting question that the hon. Lady has asked. She says that I dismissed the claim that systemic injustice was to blame, but the fact is that we did not know what was to blame at that time. That was in June, three months before my report.

What we need to understand is what exactly we mean by systemic and structural. We have seen that the data show that, at some point, ethnic minority gaps in terms of disproportionate impact completely disappeared. If these were structural issues, that is not what we would expect to see. For example, at the beginning of the second wave, we saw the disparity between black groups completely close. It is not credible to say that people were being structurally racist and stopped being so during the summer, and then over Christmas these structural issues re-emerged. That does not explain what is happening.

We need to look at what the data tells us. We cannot start from the conclusion that we want this to be systemic injustice so that we can continue to move from a political ideological perspective. We are using a scientific perspective—what does the data tell us?—and the data is telling us that this is a very complex situation. There are multiple factors, and that is why the recommendations, which the Government have, are addressing those underlying factors. It is not a genetic disease, and being an ethnic minority is not the risk factor specifically.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con) [V]: Does my hon. Friend share my regret that some Members opposite have unfortunately promoted some disinformation about the effectiveness of covid-19 vaccines, which may have contributed to lower take-up in some communities, and does she agree that elected members, whether in local or national Government, all have a responsibility to not undermine the vaccine roll-out, which has already protected over 20 million of our most vulnerable people?

Kemi Badenoch: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We in this House must recognise that we have positions of responsibility. I think I have said before at this Dispatch Box that while it might be fun to get lots of retweets for promoting messages targeting the confidence that people have in the vaccine, it is definitely not something that we should see elected parliamentarians doing. We have seen Members in this House make comments either disparaging the vaccine or claiming that the Government are using ethnic minorities as cannon fodder. It is really irresponsible, and it does directly contribute to vaccine hesitancy. If we are going to get out of this pandemic and if we are going to continue down the road map and unlock our economy, we need everyone to be responsible and to stick to the public health messaging that is approved by the NHS.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC) [V]: Thirty thousand black, Asian and minority ethnic people live across the northern and western counties of Wales. Dispersed rural communities such as these are harder for health authorities to reach and may not have the same density of support

[Hywel Williams]

networks as communities in urban areas. What discussions has the Department had with colleagues and the Welsh Government to ensure that in particular black, Asian and minority ethnic people in rural Wales and indeed across rural UK have access to the information and support they need to get their vaccination?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that matter. It is important. A lot of what we do is focused on NHS England, but I can assure him that we work with partners across all the devolved Administrations. For example, I have been at Covid-O meetings at which we spoke to representatives of the Welsh Government who were aware of these issues. We share our information widely, but if there is anything specific that he would like to know he should write to me and I will make sure that I obtain the answer that may be most appropriate for his constituency.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I warmly commend and support my hon. Friend for the work that she has done on covid disparities. She is right to say that we must go where the data tells us. Can she confirm that across all age groups and all ethnicities men are far more likely to be hospitalised and killed by the virus than women? In the 40 to 49 age group, men are twice as likely to suffer critical illness. Why is that, and what are the implications for the Government response to the pandemic?

Kemi Badenoch: My hon. Friend asks a very important question, and he is absolutely right. We know that the virus targets different groups differently, but we do not necessarily have all the answers. Some of the issues around the disproportionate impact on men are to do with occupational risk, which is not something we can control for very easily. That is why we are making sure that we address the pandemic holistically. We do not stigmatise any specific groups, but we make sure that we target information and assistance on those who are most vulnerable, particularly the elderly, who are 70 to 80 times more likely to contract the disease and die from it than other age groups.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab) [V]: We know that one of the drivers of the spread of covid-19 is people being unable to self-isolate, because they cannot afford to miss work. That is a particular problem for people in insecure or zero-hours contract jobs. Black, Asian and minority-ethnic people are more likely to be on those contracts, so are less likely to qualify for sick pay. If we want to drive down covid-19 rates everyone needs to be able to self-isolate, so will the Minister work with her colleagues to expand eligibility for the self-isolation support payment to everyone who needs it?

Kemi Badenoch: What I can tell the hon. Lady is that, certainly in the Treasury, we look at how different groups are being impacted to make sure that we target help on those who are most vulnerable. All the various schemes—not just the ones that I have mentioned such as the self-employment income support scheme or the CJRS but others such as kickstarter—are targeted at the groups that are most vulnerable, which includes ethnic minority people in particular.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con) [V]: I thank my hon. Friend for all that she is doing to help the message to reach our ethnic minorities. While the Government follow the science the Opposition have called for 10 different employment groups to move up the priority list, which the JCVI has said would slow vaccine roll-out. Does she agree that that would risk needlessly exposing vulnerable people to harm for longer, and that it shows that the Labour party is more interested in chasing headlines than following the science?

Kemi Badenoch: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We need to prioritise those who are most vulnerable, and if every single group believes that it deserves priority, that means we are not carrying out any prioritisation at all. The JCVI is independent, and we feed information into it. I wrote to it in December with the findings of my work, and it takes all of that into account. It looks at all the various factors, but we need to trust that that independent committee is doing the right thing, and I believe that it is.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab) [V]: In a speech last year, I pointed out that, despite being at higher risk from covid-19, people from black African and Caribbean backgrounds made up only 0.5% of those taking part in vaccine trials. I warned that that trend might be seen in a vaccine roll-out without a proper plan to tackle disinformation and boost confidence. The data and my own experience of volunteering at my local vaccination centre suggest that my worst fears have been realised. Bearing that in mind, can the Minister explain why it was only last month that a vaccine take-up plan was published and MPs were contacted to help?

Kemi Badenoch: I am afraid the hon. Lady is confusing one initiative for helping to improve vaccine take-up with the vaccine take-up plan. I wrote to her in October, asking her to take part in the vaccine trials. I sent that message to the Opposition Whips Office as well as to the Government Whips Office. I took part in vaccine trials in October, and there is a big difference between taking part in vaccine trials, and being vaccine-confident. One key thing about disinformation is that people believe the Government are testing vaccines on ethnic minorities, and the messaging we need to use for vaccine trials, which the hon. Lady mentioned earlier, is completely different from that needed for a vaccine-confidence campaign. She can rest assured that those of us in government know what we are doing, even if she does not.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): I recently visited the vaccination centre at St Charles' Hospital in North Kensington, and while I was there I was delighted to see that the majority of patients getting the jabs were from ethnic minorities. We have also seen a pop-up centre at the mosque, Al-Minaar, in North Kensington. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to focus on discrete individual communities to ensure that vaccine take-up is as high as possible?

Kemi Badenoch: I agree with my hon. Friend, and that is one of the reasons we are discouraging the use of the term “BAME” when talking about these issues, as this conflates lots of different communities. We must be very specific about who we are talking about, and what

their individual needs are. Various different initiatives will be tackled, based on the specific needs of community groups, and I am pleased that it looks as if there is successful vaccine take-up in her constituency.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab) [V]: Will the Minister outline the application process for, and the distribution of, community champion funding? How will highly diverse boroughs like Hounslow which did not receive funding benefit from that investment in the future?

Kemi Badenoch: Our methodology drew on a wide range of data sources, including long-term data from the DHSC and Public Health England on covid-19 incidence, data on social integration, and evidence on the prevalence and specific support needs of, for example, disabled people in an area. The methodology was tested across the Government, and with many colleagues in the local government sector, before the funding was announced. To reach disproportionately impacted communities beyond those 60 areas, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has funded two voluntary community and social enterprises to carry out national communication and engagement activities, including health promotion and encouraging vaccine uptake.

We are trying to ensure that best practice is shared across local community areas. It is not just the presence of ethnic minority communities that means they are at risk—indeed, I spoke earlier about what places a specific individual at risk. We consider multiple factors, and those are what end up determining which communities get the funding. I assure the hon. Lady that her community will benefit, even if it does not get specific money under this scheme.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): I commend the Minister and her Department for their efforts in encouraging the vaccine take-up for all. For my constituents in Redcar and Cleveland, one of the biggest hurdles is the distance to the local mass vaccine centre, which in some cases is more than 25 miles. Will she join me in calling on the Government to roll out a mass vaccine centre in Teesside, so that we can encourage take-up for all?

Kemi Badenoch: I am sorry to hear that some people are finding the distance difficult when it comes to getting their vaccine, and I will take up that issue on my hon. Friend's behalf to find out what is going on.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD) [V]: The Minister will know that the key to protecting all communities from this virus is an effective test, trace and—especially—isolate system, which is difficult for someone in an overcrowded household where others rely on them. The all-party group on coronavirus, which I chair, has heard compelling evidence that countries that have best protected their most vulnerable communities tend to offer a menu of support services to help them quarantine, which often includes free hotel accommodation should they need it. Given the worry that the virus may now be persistently stubborn, and in fact endemic in some communities, why have we not introduced free hotel accommodation for those who need it, as standard here in the UK?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I am sure that Department of Health and Social Care Ministers will be able to provide a more extensive answer specifically on free hotels. From my perspective, the vaccine is the route out of the pandemic, which is why we are making sure that those who are most vulnerable are getting the vaccine and that any hesitancy is reduced. We are also making sure that there are isolation payments for those who are unable to work to ensure they are not financially impacted.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con) [V]: I welcome the Government's decision to ensure that all adults on the learning and disability register are to be prioritised for a covid-19 vaccine, after the efforts of broadcaster Jo Whaley and disabilities charities. Can my hon. Friend confirm that everyone who is on their GP's learning and disability register will now be invited for their jab, providing protection to a group who we know are at a higher risk from the virus?

Kemi Badenoch: Yes. The Government are following the recommendations of the independent experts at the JCVI on which groups to prioritise for covid-19 vaccines. Following its updated advice, to make the process simpler and faster we will be inviting everyone for vaccination who is on their GP's learning and disability register. This will mean that those who are at a higher risk from the virus can get the protection they need. It is not a change in the priority list from the JCVI, but an operational clarification to ensure that those with a severe and profound learning disability receive their offer as part of cohort 6. Adults with Down's syndrome face an evidenced high risk of severe outcomes and have therefore already been added to the list of clinically extremely vulnerable conditions. People with Down's syndrome were prioritised for the vaccine in group 4 accordingly. As my hon. Friend can see, and I thank him for his question, this is something we are very much alive to. We continue to look at the data to make the best recommendations for vulnerable disabled people.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP) [V]: The no recourse to public funds policy is locking thousands of people out of vital support and has a disproportionate impact on black and minority ethnic families, evidenced by the fact that 82% of Citizens Advice clients looking for advice about NRPF and non-EU migrant access to benefits were people of colour. Does the Minister intend to urge the UK Government to review their NRPF policy?

Kemi Badenoch: Madam Deputy Speaker, I refer the hon. Lady to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald), who asked an identical question.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): That concludes the urgent question proceedings. I will now suspend the House for three minutes in order to allow arrangements to be made for the next item of business.

5.17 pm

Sitting suspended.

Ministerial and other Maternity Allowances Bill

Consideration of Lords amendments

Clause 1

PAYMENT OF MATERNITY ALLOWANCE: MINISTERIAL OFFICE

5.21 pm

The Paymaster General (Penny Mordaunt): I beg to move, That this House agrees with Lords amendment 1.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): With this it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments 2 to 15.

Penny Mordaunt: My noble Friend Lord True said on Second Reading in the House of Lords that, although “specific and limited” in its aims, this Bill is a significant reforming measure for women and points the way to wider reform. It will make an important and long overdue change to existing law by enabling Ministers and Opposition spokesmen for the first time to take paid maternity leave from their job for an extended period. It ends the unacceptable situation where a Minister would have to resign from Cabinet or their post to recover from childbirth and to care for their newborn child. Members in the House of Lords have exercised their role as the reviewing House and have decided to return the Bill to this House with amendments and the Government are content to accept those amendments in the House today.

The Lords amendments make a number of changes to the drafting in clauses 1 to 3 of the Bill, substituting the word “person” with the words “mother” or “expectant mother” where appropriate. These amendments tabled by my noble Friend Lord Lucas were supported by the Government in the House of Lords in recognition of the strength of feeling on this issue displayed in both Houses. The Bill, as originally drafted, was in line with the long-standing convention to use gender-neutral drafting where doing so is necessary to achieve the full policy intent. The use of the word “person” in this Bill as originally drafted achieved both those aims.

The amendments that the Government are accepting today to substitute “mother” or “expectant mother” where appropriate for “persons” in clauses 1 to 3, although grammatically challenging in places, do not affect the operation of the Bill and achieve the twin aims of being legally accurate and delivering on the policy intention. Moreover, the use of the word “mother” or “expectant mother” where appropriate is in line with recent case law of the Court of Appeal, as was noted by Lord Pannick in the House of Lords. These amendments are legally acceptable and the intention and meaning of the Bill would be unaffected by such a change. As discussed previously, the word “woman” or the word “Minister” would have run into legal difficulties, and I hope the words “mother” and “expectant mother” will be acceptable to hon. Members. During the passage of the Bill through the Commons, we also amended the explanatory notes.

I know that there will be some who are concerned by these amendments and by the Government’s accepting them, and I hope to give them some reassurance today. Many of their lordships who spoke in favour of these amendments also spoke about their understanding of

and commitment to LGBT rights. Many hon. Members in this place who I think would support the revision were, when discussing the Bill with me, also focused on ensuring that if we ever had a trans male colleague in future who needed to make use of the provisions, that would be the case. We also hope to bring forward work in future on shared parental leave and adoption leave. If legislation is needed, and we expect that it may well be, we would add new sections to the Bill, and we anticipate not having to return to amend the wording back to “person”.

I thank all those who have taken part in debates in both Houses and made interventions. The Bill before the House today makes an important and long-overdue change to existing law. It will enable all Ministers, for the first time, to take paid maternity leave from their job for an extended period. Women who aspire to and hold high office will no longer be disadvantaged. It is in recognition of these amendments that the Government wish to proceed on that basis.

We also recognise that there is much more to be done, and, as we have said, this Bill is the first step. Throughout the Bill’s passage, the Government have made commitments to Parliament both on the wider reports on issues that could no longer be accommodated in the Bill and in relation to a review of language used in drafting legislation, with a genuine willingness to work with parliamentarians. We are thankful to Members of both Houses for their willingness to work with the Government on this issue.

I once again thank the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) and her colleagues for their engagement on this Bill, and all hon. Members who have contributed to and spoken with passion in these debates. The Government are keen—some members of the Government in particular, I might add—to ensure that this Bill receives Royal Assent as soon as possible. I ask the House to accept the amendments and send the Bill for Royal Assent.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Having covered many of the key arguments on this Bill in previous Commons stages, I will keep my comments brief. Labour has agreed to support the Bill for the specific purpose of ensuring that the Attorney General can take maternity leave as a matter of urgency. It is shocking that we are currently in a position where women Ministers face resignation or demotion when choosing to have children.

While Labour supports the Bill as a small step forward for pregnant Ministers, there is no doubt that far too many gaps remain in it to make it fit for the 21st century. This is an important opportunity to reflect on the desperately unequal reality faced by so many women across our country today. As Centenary Action Group highlighted,

“The legislation must not be seen in a vacuum but instead as the opportunity for a...call to action to protect parents in the workplace during these difficult times.”

I am shocked that the Government have failed to respond to the discrimination faced by pregnant women trying to access the Chancellor’s self-employment support scheme during the pandemic. Indeed, the campaign group Pregnant Then Screwed highlights that nearly 70,000 women were unlawfully put on statutory sick pay, thereby negatively affecting their maternity pay and other entitlements. I hope the Minister will address these broader concerns in her closing remarks.

Members across the House have expressed the widespread disappointment that the Bill lacks the ambition that it should have or any attempt to broaden it out in terms of other forms of parental leave. I welcome what the Minister has said about aspirations for Government to include paternity and shared parental leave in future legislation. I urge her to also consider the need for adoption leave and leave for parents of premature and sick babies. Indeed, the debate over the wording in this legislation and the consequence of the Lords amendments reflects the extremely limited nature of the Bill. We would not be having this discussion if the Government had made adequate provision for all parental leave.

Let us be clear: every single person, no matter their gender, deserves to have parental leave when they become a parent, but the Government's last-minute rushing through of this Bill has stifled any wider progress on this issue. I point out that the speed at which the Government are acting to ensure that the Attorney General can rightly take maternity leave is in stark contrast to their failure to support pregnant women facing discrimination and hardship throughout the pandemic.

5.30 pm

The Bill solves the singular issue of maternity leave for the Attorney General, an aim that Labour supports, but Labour does not condone the Government's failure to address the wider issues of parental leave, or their failure throughout the pandemic to protect basic workers' rights. Perhaps the Minister could provide an update on the Government's long-awaited 2019 Queen's Speech commitment to strengthen legal protection against redundancy for pregnant women and new parents.

Let me be clear: every worker, no matter whether they are a Minister, an MP, a factory worker or a shop worker—everyone—deserves the right to parental leave. If we have learned anything from the coronavirus crisis, it is that acting at the point of emergency is not good governance. With more lead-in time, detailed law making could have been done to ensure inclusive parental leave.

Labour will continue to fight for these employment rights. After all, Labour has a proud history of fighting for equality, from the Equal Pay Act 1970 to the Sex Discrimination Act 1975, the Equality Act 2010 and the introduction of the national minimum wage. All those progressive pieces of equalities legislation were delivered by Labour. I look forward to the Government's promised legislation to make further progress in this long and ongoing fight for equality and to fill in the gaps that exist in this legislation.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con) [V]: Let me briefly try to set the context in which these amendments are being considered. This is an issue that goes to trans and women's rights. It is a year since I was elected as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on global LGBT+ rights, which is the only LGBT rights APPG. While the title of the group is not meant to exclude the domestic LGBT rights agenda, it is a statement about where the focus should be, given our astonishing legal and societal progress for LGB people in the UK over the last two or so decades—progress of which I am a personal and fortunate beneficiary.

When I put it in the language of my first profession, the war on these issues had been won, and we were really in the business of rounding up the prisoners—tidying up.

Much of that tidying related to the complexities generated by enabling trans people also to be able to enjoy the freedom to live their lives as they wished. The trans agenda understandably became the dominating issue for the British LGBT rights lobby in our civil society. By 2018, with the publication of the LGBT action plan and the consultation on reform of the Gender Recognition Act 2004, the direction of travel looked set fair for trans people to be able to enjoy those rights and live their lives as they wished.

However, to say that there has been a change of climate for trans people since my right hon. Friend the Paymaster General, who is guiding this Bill through the House, lost her responsibilities for equalities is something of an understatement. There is going to be no change to the Gender Recognition Act; self-identification, which is the global gold standard for rights in this area, is going to have to wait; and gender identity services, now acknowledged to be grossly underfunded, with enormous demand on them, are now under well-funded legal assault as well.

We currently face a situation where trans people feel under a full-on attack, yet if one listened to their lordships who were making the case for this amendment, one would have thought it was the other way round. The proponent of these amendments said in the other place:

“We are currently faced with a full-on attack on women's sex-based rights—a misogynistic and bullying campaign which seeks to diminish women's rights in the name of the rights of trans people.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 25 February 2021; Vol. 810, c. 962.]

I want to gently suggest that my noble Friend Lord Lucas turn the board around and see what the perspective is from the other side. The context is wild and exaggerated threats about the position of women's rights from trans people. For example, his colleague in the other place, the noble Baroness Fox of Buckley, said:

“What is a threat to women is a particular brand of trans identity ideology. That does threaten women, but that is not the same as trans people.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 25 February 2021; Vol. 810, c. 945.]

I look forward to hearing the explanation of that, because what trans people are seeing is *The Times* newspaper—the newspaper of record in the United Kingdom—carrying 250 stories of this kind, generally without satisfactory supporting evidence.

We have this amendment in a Bill that deals with the maternity leave arrangements of one woman who happens to be the Attorney General. A debate in this House and the other place suddenly came out of nowhere, generating the most extraordinary amount of interest and passion for an entirely technical correction of an anomaly in ministerial maternity leave arrangements. Sitting behind the passion engaged on this are agendas, which are in public for those who are taking an interest—principally the trans community—of the Heritage Foundation and the LGB Alliance, which, if one examines its followers on Twitter, does not seem to have a huge wider interest in the subject of LGBT rights. They are hearing an agenda being used, which we heard only yesterday from Donald Trump in his address to the Conservative Political Action Conference, exploiting the issue of a potential threat to women's sports, which need to be rescued from this threat. We know that, under the Equality Act 2010

[Crispin Blunt]

in the United Kingdom, it is for sports administrators to make reasonable decisions to protect the integrity of their sports. These threats, in reality, do not exist.

What I want to say to trans people and their supporters is that today is not the ground on which we should stand. An innocuous sounding amendment in a tiny, technical Bill aimed at resolving the Attorney General's maternity leave is not the place to have the fight around the principle. But there is a principle engaged here about gender-neutral language, and we have work to do to make it clear that trans rights do not come at the expense of women's rights. We can perfectly well have both. Women's rights must be protected, and reasonable provision must be made to protect women from threats that are real and evident. In reality, trans women pose no threat to women, but we do have those issues to address.

I therefore support the Government in accommodating this amendment, which has, to a degree, been forced upon them. But this necessary compromise must not undermine the position of the Government and what I believe to be the decent, caring majority in both Houses of Parliament who want to see trans rights properly established.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP) [V]: I am mindful that the Bill is in front of us today because the Attorney General is about to have a baby, and I wish her and her family all the best. Maternity leave is a right—it should not be a discretionary benefit—and that should not be different for Ministers or MPs. More broadly, though, we are not in the best place on maternity either in this House or, more importantly, outside it. Many of us have spoken at length about the issues that the Bill does not tackle but ought to. None of that has anything particularly to do with the Attorney General's leave, so I would not suggest putting any barrier in the way of that, but it is my firm intention to secure from the Minister some clear commitments as to what she will do next.

It is absolutely right, and not before time, that Ministers are able to go on maternity leave. Despite the protestations from those on the Government Benches when we discussed this before, I still think it is unacceptable that the Prime Minister of the day is the ultimate arbiter of whether this can actually happen. I have said it before and I say it again: it should never be necessary for women to seek the potentially grudging consent of a boss to take maternity leave. If it is beyond our wit in 2021 to find a more satisfactory way of dealing with things like that, it is a poor show.

That is because what we do here and what we do with this makes a difference to how other people deal with their maternity leave, be they MPs, where the status quo is not much use, either to MPs or to their constituents; our staff, and perhaps the Minister can say something about what changes could be made to Short money to support proper maternity provisions for staff members; or all the people outside the political world, who are just trying to get by and will rightly wonder why we can manage to press ahead with such haste in this situation—again, I am pleased to get this sorted for the Attorney General; it is right that we do that—but have not been able to make such progress, and at such speed that would make all the difference, for ordinary families.

The statistics from *Pregnant Then Screwed* say it all. Its survey of 20,000 women in July last year found, among other things, that 61% of women believe that their maternity leave was a factor in a redundancy decision, and self-employed women who have taken maternity leave in the last three years saw their Government support cut by a third, or even by two thirds, if they have taken two maternity leaves, compared with dads, who are not impacted at all financially by maternity leave.

Let me touch on the amendments to language that have emerged from the Lords. The Minister gave a pretty concerted defence of gender-neutral language previously, so I am interested to see the change of tack here, given that it is perfectly normal to draft in gender-neutral terms. I am not convinced that this change is either progress or progressive. That is relevant, first, because the Bill is far too narrow in scope and deals with only this one issue and, secondly, because our representation here is just not reflective of who we are more broadly; we are far less diverse as a political group than the people we represent, and the lack of proper provisions for maternity leave illustrate that well. The Bill, as far as it goes, only makes provision for maternity leave for birth mothers. It does not make provision for all the different types of leave we have talked about—parental leave, paternity leave, adoption leave, shared leave and so on. So I ask the Minister to reflect further on the fact that everyone should have access to decent parental leave, not just some new parents.

On that note, I would be grateful if the Minister could say exactly when she intends to come back to the House with concrete proposals to deal with all these other pressing issues, so that we can see improvements to maternity, paternity and parental leave provisions far more broadly. That is particularly important as we move beyond the lockdown phase of the pandemic and caring and work responsibilities need to work together, rather than against one another. For example, the right to request flexible working from the start of employment would help so many people, with women bearing the disproportionate burden of caring responsibilities being particularly in need of that kind of progress. That is often an issue post maternity leave.

While we are dealing with this one narrow Bill, we need to appreciate that the status quo is far from good enough. The UK has the second lowest payment rates for maternity leave of OECD countries, with less than a third of gross average earnings replaced by maternity payments. Despite lengthy maternity leave entitlements, full-rate equivalent paid maternity leave lasts for only 12 weeks and a maternity allowance of just £151.20, which is worth about half the national minimum wage for a full-time worker, is obviously completely unacceptable. The fact that that is increasing by a grand total of 77p a week in April is shockingly inadequate. The Minister has to recognise that. She also has to recognise that we really need legislation to expand eligibility for statutory maternity leave and pay for workers who still do not qualify, including people on insecure contracts such as agency workers or zero-hours contract workers.

Much needs to be done. We need action on those insecure workers, maternity leave, parental leave and paternity pay, and we need policies that take account of the different shapes of families and different kinds of support that will be necessary. All these matters have to be addressed

with some urgency. I realise that they are not the specific issues in front of us today, but it all fits together into a lack of care and direction from the UK Government.

Although the SNP supports the Bill, there is no getting away from the fact that the UK ranks very poorly in terms of maternity provision, and the very particular narrow nature of the Bill does nothing to remedy that. In fact, it just demonstrates how archaic Westminster can be. It is worth reflecting that an independent Scotland could do so much better on maternity and parental leave—not just for Ministers, but for everyone.

5.45 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD) [V]: It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald). However, I am profoundly disappointed that we have to discuss this amendment to the language in the Bill today against a background of an increasingly bitter and divisive debate about LGBT and transgender rights. I thank the Minister for her reassurance at the beginning of the debate that there is no undermining of LGBT rights and that these issues will be addressed in the future.

I am sure that I am not alone when I say that it is the proudest boast of my life that I am a mother. I am completely committed to the rights laid down in this Bill. When it was first debated, I was concerned, as were many others, that it had taken too long to bring the legislation before us, and that it did not go far enough in recognising all forms of parenting and the need for wider parental leave. Today, I am more concerned that this important piece of legislation is potentially being, or could be, sidetracked. Regardless of my frustration about the background to the debate, I would not want that delay to happen. I know that there are those in this place who believe that there is an important political point about the language, but I do not believe that it is as important as the necessity for this Bill.

As a liberal—in this context, I believe that there are many liberals with a small “l” in this place on both sides of the House—I am firmly of the view that language that excludes or remove the rights of any group in favour of another is unacceptable. That is precisely why, for me, gender-neutral language is preferable and why it is used. It does not erase anyone. I certainly do not feel in any way compromised as a woman by its use, or that my rights are in any way undermined. For me, it also reflects more accurately the reality of modern life.

The Bill relates to benefits accruing to those who give birth, extending them to Government Ministers and some Opposition spokespeople who currently do not have those benefits. It does not deal with the registration of births; it is not proposed that that process be changed. Neither does the scope extend to legal gender recognition or restrictions. In that context, I would have no objection whatever to the gender-neutral language if it were used, and I have no intention of objecting to the change. However, I cannot see why Parliament would not persist with gender-neutral language in the future. As the Minister made it clear that there will be further legislation, that this legislation does not affect LGBT rights, and that, if the occasion arises, a trans male Minister would not be disadvantaged, I feel that the importance of this legislation—and of having it enacted as quickly as possible—means that we should not delay over perfectly legal language.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab) [V]: In the run-up to International Women’s Day, this is an opportune moment to welcome the Bill and the long overdue advancement of basic rights that it brings for women in Parliament. No Minister should be forced out of their post due to pregnancy, and participation in politics and public life should be accessible to all. However, gaping holes remain. The Bill only covers maternity leave for birth mothers and does not include paternity, shared parental or adoption leave, or considerations for parents of premature babies.

Centuries of struggle by women and trade unions and international best practice show that gender equality is best achieved when rights to parental leave are extended to all parents, so although this development is welcome it does not go far enough. The Bill fails to cover Ministers in the Scottish and Welsh Parliaments and the Northern Ireland Assembly, so will the Minister commit to strengthening the Bill and making it more inclusive at the earliest possible opportunity? If we cannot get it right in the corridors of power, how can we expect the policies we decide in Parliament to effectively tackle gender discrimination throughout society?

After a decade of austerity cuts by this Government that fell heavily on the shoulders of working women, and particularly on black working women—cuts that the United Nations special rapporteur on extreme poverty called so sexist that they may as well have been compiled by a group of misogynists in a room—is it at all surprising that the pandemic has disproportionately left women at greater risk of leaving or losing their jobs, reducing their income and taking on extra caring burdens?

Earlier this month, a report from the Women and Equalities Committee, which I sit on, warned that this Government’s plans for economic recovery risk turning back the clock unless the equality impact of every policy is fully assessed. Will the Minister take this opportunity to confirm the Government’s commitment to assessing the equality impact of their covid recovery plans? Women are more likely to be employed in sectors shut down during the pandemic, are more vulnerable to job loss or being placed on furlough, and are disproportionately employed on precarious contracts. The burden of juggling childcare and home schooling duty, as well as caring responsibilities for elderly or sick family members, has all fallen disproportionately on the shoulders of women.

Research by the TUC revealed that a quarter of working mums are using their annual leave to manage their childcare during covid, with nearly one in five being forced to reduce their working hours or to take unpaid leave from work. In response, the TUC has called for temporary access to the furlough scheme for parents and those with caring responsibilities, and I want to take this opportunity to add my voice to that call.

In conclusion, the provisions of the Bill barely scratch the surface when it comes to promoting gender equality in Parliament and ensuring that politics is both accessible and inclusive. I urge the Government to take this opportunity to commit to strengthening the Bill and to acknowledge the need for much more to be done to protect basic rights for women inside and outside Parliament.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) [V]: I would like to say a few brief words and thank all other right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions. This is all about

[*Jim Shannon*]

making sure that Ministers' maternity allowances are in place, so the amendments are very simple, as has been suggested, and I believe that there should be no difficulty in accepting them.

I can well remember that when someone close to me had a miscarriage, she was told on Mother's Day by a lovely lady who had given her flowers in her church with all the other mothers. "You do not have your baby, but you're still a mummy." Whether a mother holds her baby in her arms or only in her heart, the creation of life gives her that title and I believe that it is right and proper that we respect that in law. I support the amendments, which simply clarify that position.

I echo the comments of others who have suggested to the Minister in a very nice way that this should be the first stage in delivering for elected representatives in the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly, and for councillors and those who hold positions in local government. It is time to get it right. In her conclusion, perhaps the Minister can reassure us that those in the devolved Administrations and at council level will find the same liberties, equalities and opportunities.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank all hon. Members for their thoughtful contributions. In closing this debate, I will respond to a few of the points made. The Government have been clear throughout the debate in both this House and the House of Lords that the Bill is an important step forward that at last makes provision for Ministers to take paid maternity leave. I repeat my thanks to the Opposition Front Benchers for their constructive support—not only on this, but on the future work we are planning to bring forward. I am pleased that the Bill will be able to make similar maternity provisions for Opposition office holders as well.

I turn to the comments of the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith). In earlier consideration of the Bill, I spoke about the context in which we are bringing it forward. I am very conscious that even if we took into account future ministerial post-holders, this is still a tiny group of individuals compared with the general population.

There is work that we want to bring forward, not least the work that the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has been leading on, to help make progress on a number of related areas. This Bill has afforded me the opportunity to check in with those Ministers and to encourage them. It is understandable that the effort of that Department has been focused on the pandemic, but if we are to recover from that, we have to ensure that women are economically empowered and are supported, and many of the things that BEIS has been looking at will help do that.

The hon. Lady asks whether we have considered premature and sick babies. We have, and I think the provisions in the Bill will certainly help anyone in that situation. We originally drafted this Bill to incorporate adoption leave and shared parental leave, but it was too difficult because of some of the issues around the royal prerogative, Ministers, caps on payroll and so forth, which is why we need a little bit more time to do this additional piece of work before we bring back, I think, future legislation to address those issues.

That will also dock into work that hon. Members will want to do in this place with the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority. We recognise its independence, but clearly we are talking about the same individuals. Indeed, the Attorney General may have got her ministerial situation sorted—I hope, if this Bill gets Royal Assent—but she will still face the difficulties that other Members have spoken about as a Member of Parliament.

Turning to my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt), I first thank him and the all-party group for the incredible work they have done not only on domestic issues, but internationally. When we in this place look back at footage of our predecessors and see some of the remarks made decades ago about LGBT people and the homophobia that was exhibited, I am sure that all of us cringe. I think we should ask ourselves whether, were we in the Commons at that time, we would have called it out. Would we have gone out of our way to send our support, empathy and understanding to gay people at the time?

The challenge for us today is exactly the same with trans people, and I hope that all Members of this House—I know that many Members do—take that responsibility extremely seriously, none more so than my hon. Friend. The amendments we are accepting today are legitimate and understandable, and critically they are also legally sound, but let me say in supporting them from this Dispatch Box that trans men are men and trans women are women, and great care has been taken in the drafting and accepting of these amendments to ensure that that message has got across.

So often these issues are presented as an intractable row between two incompatible positions. They are not; they are about all people being able to go about their lives and to be supported in doing so. I know that many hon. Members in this place and their lordships in the other place feel that very strongly and feel a huge responsibility. As a woman, I agree with many of the comments made today. I want the rights of all women to be taken care of and all men to be safeguarded, too.

The hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) made some very good points. I have to inform her again, sadly, that Ministers have no rights because of the royal prerogative—I am sorry to say that—and, therefore, the Prime Minister is the arbiter of this, but I cannot imagine a situation where any Prime Minister would not allow someone to take maternity leave. If anyone has any idea how to get around that as a Minister, I am quite keen to have some rights. We will obviously keep that under review, but that is the current situation.

6 pm

The hon. Lady also questioned whether the Bill was progressive. I think it is progressive for women and for trans men, and that is an important message that we should send. We want to bring the future piece of work that we wish to do on those other matters back to this place before the summer recess. I do not know whether it will involve legislation or the nature of that legislation, so I cannot give her any more assurances on that, but we will bring back the work that we will do cross-party on these matters.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) made some very powerful remarks; I thank her for them and agree with them entirely. The hon. Member for Liverpool,

Riverside (Kim Johnson) also spoke about the context in which we are presenting this Bill. I reassure her that it is our intention to bring forward adoption leave and shared parental leave and related matters. She is right to point to the impact of the pandemic on women. Finally, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) shared a sad and beautiful story with us. We have taken into consideration the situation where there is a stillborn child. We spoke on Second Reading about the opportunities that this presents for the devolved Administrations and, importantly, for councillors.

In conclusion, the Government have accepted these amendments. We are confident that the wording of the Bill is legally accurate and does not adversely affect the operation of its intent. Moreover, the Government are content that the Lords amendments are legally acceptable and more inclusive than other suggested alternatives. The Government are supporting these amendments in this House and recommends to it that they are accepted and that the Bill is now allowed to proceed to Royal Assent.

Lords amendment 1 agreed to.

Lords amendments 2 to 15 agreed to.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): That concludes the consideration of Lords amendments. I will now suspend the House for three minutes to allow the necessary arrangements to be made for the next business.

6.3 pm

Sitting suspended.

Electricity

6.6 pm

The Minister for Business, Energy and Clean Growth (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): I beg to move,

That the draft Electricity Supplier Payments (Amendment) Regulations 2021, which were laid before this House on 21 January, be approved.

The statutory instrument amends regulations concerning the levies that fund the operational costs budget for the Low Carbon Contracts Company and the Electricity Settlements Company. The Low Carbon Contracts Company administers the contracts for difference scheme on behalf of the Government and the Electricity Settlements Company administers the capacity market scheme. Those schemes are designed to incentivise the significant investment required in our electricity infrastructure; to keep costs affordable for consumers; and to help to meet our net zero target while keeping our energy supply secure.

Contracts for difference provide long-term price stabilisation to low-carbon generators, allowing investment to come forward at a lower cost of capital, and therefore at a lower cost to consumers. The capacity market ensures security of electricity supply by providing all forms of capacity with the right incentives to be on the system and delivers capacity when needed by increasing generation or by turning down electricity demand in return for guaranteed payments.

In both schemes, participants bid for support via a competitive auction that ensures that costs to consumers are minimised. The next contracts for difference auction, the fourth to date, is planned to open in late 2021, and will be available to both established technologies such as solar PV and onshore wind as well as less-established technologies such as floating offshore wind. As the Prime Minister announced in October, we are seeking to secure up to 12 GW of renewable electricity capacity in this round—double that secured in the last round, which was held in 2019. That will allow a broad range of renewable technologies to come forward while delivering the best deal for bill payers.

The capacity market is tried and tested, and is the most cost-effective way of ensuring that we have the electricity capacity that we need now and in future. It facilitates investment in the existing capacity to remain in the market, and drives innovation in financing new capacity to be built. The capacity auctions held to date have secured the capacity that we need to meet the forecast peak demand at 2023-24. The next auctions, which will open tomorrow with the T-1 auction, and on 9 March with the T-4 auction, will secure most of the capacity that we need in 2024-25.

The Low Carbon Contracts Company and the Electricity Settlements Company play a critical role in delivering the contracts for difference and capacity market schemes. They enter into and manage contracts for difference with low-carbon generators, and collect the supplier obligation levy from suppliers, which they use to make payments to generators under contracts for difference.

The statutory instrument sets a revised operational cost levy for the Low Carbon Contracts Company, and a revised settlements cost levy for the Electricity Settlements Company, which they collect from suppliers to fund their day-to-day operations. It is important that the LCCC and the ESC are sufficiently funded to perform

[Anne-Marie Trevelyan]

their roles effectively, given their critical role in administering those schemes. However, the Government have made it clear that both companies must deliver value for money, and with that in mind we have scrutinised closely their operational cost budgets to ensure that they reflect their operational requirements and objectives. Savings have been identified in a number of areas. Both the LCCC and the ESC are mindful of the need to deliver value for money, as their guiding principle is to maintain investor confidence in the contracts for difference and capacity market schemes while minimising costs to consumers. They have taken a number of actions to date to reduce costs, and it is because of their actions that costs are falling both per contract and by overall generation capacity despite the growing size of the contracts for difference portfolio.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): My hon. Friend rightly points out that contracts for difference have meant a massive leap forward in our investment in wind technology and a decrease in costs for consumers. Does she agree that this is a perfect way to increase production of hydrogen as well, and will she consider meeting me to discuss how we can use contracts for difference in hydrogen production?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: My hon. Friend is, as ever, a champion for Teesside, where, the work under way to help grow the future hydrogen capacity for our country is absolutely cutting edge. I will be absolutely thrilled to meet him to discuss this matter more fully. For now, the CfDs will be for the existing and established technologies, but he is not wrong that the future is bright for hydrogen. I look forward to meeting him to discuss it more fully.

We expect to increase to 55.16 GW of capacity and 546 capacity providers in 2021-22. Despite the increase in those numbers, the operational costs are expected to be marginally lower this year than last. The operational cost budgets for both companies were subject to consultation, which gave stakeholders the opportunity to scrutinise and test the key assumptions in the budgets and, importantly, to ensure that they represent value for money. The budgets remain unchanged save for one amendment, which I will briefly summarise. The consultation was published before the outcome of the 2020 spending review was known. The review had announced a pause in public sector pay rises for the majority of the workforce. Taking into account the outcome of this review and the wider economic landscape, the LCCC's remuneration committee decided to agree a pay pause for its staff in 2021-22. Consequently, an allowance contained within LCCC's operational cost budget for pay rises that was included in the consultation has now been removed.

To conclude, taking into account the removal of this allowance, the proposed operational cost budget for the LCCC in 2021-22 is £20,736,000 and £7,472,000 for the ESC. The amendments revise the levies currently in place to enable the companies to collect enough revenue to fund these budgets. Any levy collected that is not spent will be returned to suppliers at the end of the financial year in accordance with regulations. Therefore, subject to the will of Parliament, the settlement cost levy for the Electricity Settlements Company is due to come into force on the day after these regulations are made, and the operational costs levy for the LCCC by 1 April 2021. I commend these draft regulations to the House.

6.13 pm

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): The Minister has done the heavy lifting in this debate by explaining to us the detail of the regulation before us. She has also explained very succinctly why it is necessary to operate the calculations concerning the operational budgets both for the CfD counterparty body and for the settlement body as far as the capacity market is concerned on a one-year basis rather than a three-year basis, as has previously been the case in the House. The reason is that the operational levy costs rate for both bodies is effectively calculated by dividing a proposed annual budget by the total forecast electricity demand for the future. Under present circumstances, we are finding it very difficult to find out what electricity demand will be for the next year given the substantial fluctuations in demand that have occurred with the covid pandemic. Consequently, it seems sensible to allocate the total operational budgets for these bodies on a one-year basis, rather than on a three-year basis as has happened since 2018. The arrangement from 2018 onwards aimed to ensure that suppliers had no surprises, and had a much better view of their liability in respect of these operational budgets, because those budgets are recovered by levies on suppliers, and as I will state in a moment, those levies are passed on to customers. We do not oppose this statutory instrument, because in the circumstances it is sensible.

My first question for the Minister relates to her intentions regarding the periodicity of this arrangement in future years. I assume it is her intention to revert to a three-year settlement at the earliest opportunity, that this proposed one-year arrangement is because of the force of present circumstances, and that there is no suggestion by the Government that we should go back to the pre-2018 arrangements. I would be grateful if she stated that very clearly for us this afternoon.

The second question I have for the Minister relates to the method for recovering these operational budgets. We have already talked about how it works; the operational costs are recovered from suppliers according to the calculations I have described. Those costs—the Minister has set the CfD counterparty budget costs at £20.7 million for this year—are recovered by the levy on suppliers, and the suppliers pass those costs on to customers, which means that customers' bills go up. This is not an enormous part of the whole levy process, but it is not an insignificant part of it; it is calculated that the cost for the CfD counterparty body alone will add something like 40p to customer bills this next year. Indeed, there is quite a startling rise since the previous period of settlement. My calculations are that there will be about a 17.5% rise this year.

As we progress with the auctions, and progress down the road towards the 40 GW of offshore wind by 2030, to which we have committed, inevitably those operational costs will rise substantially, so the levy will also rise substantially. Whether it will continue to rise by 17% a year I am not sure, but certainly that is a very substantial increase, and I suspect those increases will continue over the period.

In addition to this, in the White Paper that has just been published, a new levy is suggested on gas bill payers to facilitate the development of green gas, anaerobic digestion and associated activities. I thoroughly support that development, but not necessarily raising the money for it by a continuation of the levy mechanism.

Finally, if we do go ahead with the regulated asset base arrangement as far as nuclear power is concerned, that will create a huge additional levy on bill payers for the future. We have a pattern here of levies being put on customers' bills to underwrite these activities. I happily concede that it is certainly a very small levy compared with others, but I think the Minister would agree that every little bit adds up. We have a picture in front of us, potentially, of a very substantial increase in customers' bills to pay for these sorts of arrangements.

When the Minister reviews the arrangement at the end of the one-year hiatus, what will her thinking be on whether there are different ways of paying for those counterparty costs? Will the answer always be a levy on customers, or are there other ways of facilitating this, so that the cost does not fall on the customer? I think she will agree that that is probably the most regressive way of funding these arrangements; there are certainly better ways. It may be that the matters before us should be subject to one of those better ways.

6.21 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP) [V]: I agree with the Labour shadow Minister that the regulations are relatively straightforward, so we will not oppose them either. There are, however, a number of questions that still need to be answered.

First, paragraph 14.3 of the explanatory memorandum slips in the fact that a review of the operation of the electricity market reform programme was supposed to have been undertaken by December 2018. It is completely unacceptable that that report is now effectively more than two years out of date, and blaming Brexit and covid does not really stack up. What is the timeframe for that report's coming before Parliament? What is the mechanism for presenting the findings of the review, and what will the scrutiny arrangements be, so that the Opposition parties can challenge it?

Paragraph 7.7 of the explanatory memorandum states that the cost of new premises is outwith the control of the CfD counterparty. Why are those costs outwith its control? Why are new premises needed? Does the need for new premises take into account the fact that it looks like many companies will be doing much more homeworking and hybrid working?

Paragraph 10.8 of the explanatory notes explains that the CfD counterparty budget has been cut to reflect the Chancellor's squeeze on public sector pay. The Minister touched on that, but the cuts are £111,000. How many employees had their pay frozen to generate a saving of £111,000?

On the capacity market, what steps have been taken to reduce the reliance on diesel generators? How much of the capacity market is based on fossil fuel generation? There is no point in continuing to move towards net zero when the capacity market relies on fossil fuel generation, so the Government need to address that.

Paragraph 7.7 of the explanatory notes also confirms the much-increased capacity in the auction. I certainly welcome the increased capacity in the forthcoming auction, but can the Minister advise us on whether the procurement process will be amended to incentivise the use of local content in the UK supply chain to ensure a proper green recovery? Does she understand that if procurement continues to be based on price only, then the likes of CS Wind in Cambeltown and BiFab yards across Scotland

will never win enough work to compete on price regularly? They can do the quality, but they need sustained work to get to a place where they can compete on price.

What steps will be taken in this auction to ensure that offshore wind projects in Scotland are not prejudiced due to the grid charges? It is outrageous that generators connecting in the north of Scotland still have to pay to connect to the grid, but generators connecting in the south of Great Britain are paid to connect to the grid. It is completely unfair and needs to be revised. I would like to know when the Government will do that, and what they will do to ensure that generators in Scotland are not prejudiced in the forthcoming auction.

Now that we have an increased target for offshore wind generation of 40 GW by 2030, what steps is the Minister taking to speed up the development of an offshore grid to help to facilitate this transformation? Will there be ring-fenced pots for wave and tidal in the forthcoming auction? What consideration has she given to power purchasing agreements to free up investment in the development of these emerging technologies? Also, what is she doing to ensure a route to market for pumped hydro? One of our colleagues has suggested a CfD for hydrogen. Would she agree to that? We also need a CfD mechanism for pumped hydro storage; that could double storage capacity. SSE is ready to go with a new pumped hydro scheme at Coire Glas, and Drax has developed proposals for an additional pumped hydro scheme at the Cruachan dam, but a route to market is critical to free up private investment.

Paragraph 12.4 of the explanatory notes states that these proposals will account for only 0.1% of a typical consumer's bill, but as the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) asked, what will be the cumulative effect of the CfD process on bills? If a user is struggling to pay for their electricity, they use less electricity, so the impact on their bills will be much higher, because they use less electricity than a typical consumer. We need to remember that the bills of the people who are really struggling—the fuel poor—will be more adversely affected in real terms. What will the Government do to take account of that, and what assessment has been made of the cumulative impact? As we move towards net zero and the ever-increasing CfD rounds, what measures will be put in place to protect the fuel poor? This will be particularly relevant when it comes to funding heat decarbonisation. The Committee on Climate Change has estimated that something like £250 billion-worth of expenditure will be needed to decarbonise our heating systems. It is impossible to imagine that that can just be put on users' bills, so other mechanisms will be required.

While I am mentioning costs, I cannot help but mention the Government's obsession with nuclear power. The £92.50 strike rate for Hinkley will look even more ridiculous once the next option round is completed. The fact is that both units at Hinkley will probably not be operational until 2028, while the existing nuclear power plants will go offline in 2022 and 2024. If the UK manages to keep the lights on for a few years without that nuclear power, that alone will put the baseload argument to bed. It is complete bunkum, and the Government need to move away from their obsession with nuclear and their determination to get Sizewell C signed. As the hon. Member for Southampton, Test, says, that would place an unacceptable burden on the bill payers of the UK, and it would be helpful if the Government woke up and realised that.

[Alan Brown]

Will the Government finally update their estimate and appraisal system, which makes the bizarre assumption that nuclear costs will fall in the future? The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy's system favours nuclear and is prejudiced against onshore wind, so it needs to update its processes.

I look forward to hearing from the Minister. As I say, I will not oppose the regulations, but there are a lot of questions still to be answered. The Government's overall energy policy needs to be updated, and they need a clear near zero strategy. I am more than happy to meet the Minister to discuss this at any time.

6.29 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) [V]: I thank the Minister for her presentation and for setting the scene so well.

Regulation 2 sets a rate for the operational cost levy and the electricity system operator regulations from 1 April 2021 in the midst of a pandemic with people being at home and unable to go out, putting immense financial pressure on them, especially those who are furloughed. I would therefore like the Minister to confirm that we have taken the opportunity to ensure that all levies that are to be imposed will not see the consumer adversely impacted. Further, does she believe that we have built-in protection for the consumer at this level against price gouging and monopolies? Consumers must get fair energy prices. I seek confirmation that there will be protection for the consumers. The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) referred to the fuel-poor. I also make a plea for those consumers and seek to ensure that protection for them—indeed for all consumers, but especially for them—will be in place.

People are working from home and kids are on the tech all day to do their homework. The level of consumption has massively increased in a huge number of homes. We must consider this at all levels, especially now. I would like to ensure that this seemingly small and straightforward measure will not adversely impact the ordinary person financially. We must also look out for the fuel-poor, of whom there are more in my constituency than there were a year ago, and I believe that is the case in every other constituency as well.

6.31 pm

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I thank hon. Members for their valuable contributions to the debate. I will do my best to answer their questions and commit to replying by letter or having meetings with any of them if they wish to follow up on any of the issues that I do not cover.

In answer to the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead), periodicity for future years of pricing is not yet determined. However, as he rightly set out, the challenges of the past year have meant that we felt it was more appropriate to look at it on a single-year basis this year, hoping, clearly, that things will settle and we will get back to some sort of normality in the year ahead.

The budgetary increase for the LCCC is in fact 19%. There are three main reasons for that. It is partly due to the impact of covid on energy and insurance markets. The LCCC will now be managing an increased number of CfDs in the year ahead. It is also having to move to a

new building this year because the one it has been in is being demolished, so that is a technical reason for having to invest in a new site. The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) raised the question of savings. In fact, with the new building, the LCCC has taken the opportunity to look at staff working patterns and the flexibility that some staff will want to use, and that has brought a saving of £184,000 on the overall costs, which is a good thing.

Interestingly, in relation to the hon. Gentleman's point about pumped hydro, he is the second person today who has raised that with me and asked that we can look at it, so I look forward to speaking to him and others on the subject. There are three pots for the contracts for difference. Pot 1 will cover onshore wind and solar, pot 2 is for the less developed technologies like tidal, wave and geothermal—that is perhaps where pumped hydro might sit if we look to do that—and pot 3 is for offshore wind, which is obviously a fast-growing sector. I hope that answers hon. Members' questions, but if there is anything I have missed, I am happy to write to them.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) raised the important question of the challenges with fuel bills for many of our constituents following a really difficult year. I was in fact discussing exactly that with Ofgem this morning, and we will be doing a piece of work to make sure that we are as apprised as we can be of the challenges.

Dr Whitehead: The question that I asked at the end of my contribution was whether, in the light of those increases and of greater increases in the future, as I think we both agree will be the case in terms of counterparty costs, the Minister is actively thinking about other ways of funding that, or is she happy to continue with the levy arrangements we have discussed this afternoon?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: It is very much a live issue, and, across the multiplicity of the energy resources that we are looking at, we are thinking very much about how we will do that. I am very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman, if he would like, to discuss that in more detail in the weeks ahead.

I hope that I have been able to provide the necessary assurances for hon. Members to approve the statutory instrument, and I am grateful to them for indicating their support. As I said at the start of the debate, the regulations that the Government are seeking to amend through this instrument will revise the operational cost levies for the LCCC and ESC. These companies play a crucial role in delivering the contracts for difference scheme and the capacity market. They must be sufficiently funded to perform that role effectively, but those costs must be kept to a minimum. It is my view that the operational budget for 2021-22 strikes an appropriate balance between ensuring that companies are adequately funded and that consumer bills are minimised. I therefore commend the regulations to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I will suspend the House for a short period to allow the sanitisation of the Dispatch Boxes.

6.36 pm

Sitting suspended.

Children and Young Persons

6.39 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Vicky Ford): I beg to move,

That the draft Electronic Commerce Directive (Education, Adoption and Children) (Amendment etc.) Regulations 2021, which were laid before this House on 18 January, be approved.

I thank the Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee and the European Statutory Instruments Committee for considering these regulations. I also thank the other place for approving the regulations on 10 February, following what may have been the quickest debate in parliamentary history.

Let me assure Members that these regulations do not change policy. They are a technical measure to remedy deficiencies of retained EU law arising from the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the EU. They are necessary to enable our legislation, which I will speak to in more detail shortly, to operate properly now that we have left the EU and the transition period has finished. The regulations remove statutory measures that implemented article 3 of the e-commerce directive, better known as the country of origin principle, from two pieces of legislation: the Education Act 2002 and the Electronic Commerce Directive (Adoption and Children Act 2002) Regulations 2005.

The e-commerce directive was introduced by the EU in 2000 to facilitate digital trade within the EU's internal market, allowing the free movement of information society services, more commonly referred to as online service providers. The country of origin principle applies to online service providers operating across the European economic area. The principle means that online service providers only have to follow certain rules in the state in which they are established, rather than the rules in each state where their service is received. It applied to a variety of UK legislation.

These regulations concern two aspects of policy: teacher misconduct and adoption. Section 141F of the Education Act 2002 sets out reporting restrictions that aim to protect the identification of a teacher in England and Wales facing an allegation of an offence made by or on behalf of a pupil until the point at which legal proceedings have begun or the Secretary of State for Education publishes information following an investigation or decision about the allegation. Section 141G makes it an offence to publish information in breach of section 141F. Schedule 11B applies the country of origin principle to the offence created by section 141G.

The Electronic Commerce Directive (Adoption and Children Act 2002) Regulations 2005 give effect to the country of origin principle for two offences in the Adoption and Children Act 2002. First, section 92, dealing with restrictions on arranging adoptions, prevents anyone who is not an adoption agency or acting pursuant to a court order from taking steps to arrange the adoption of a child. Secondly, sections 123 and 124 deal with restrictions on the advertising of adoptions and prohibit advertisements relating to the adoption of a child unless undertaken by an adoption agency.

The regulations before the House will change where online service providers that break the law are able to be prosecuted. If an online service provider commits an offence created by the Education Act 2002 and the

Adoption and Children Act 2002 in the UK, they will be liable for prosecution in the UK. If a UK-based online service provider publishes prohibited information in a European economic area state, they will be subject to prosecution in the state in which they commit the offence. The other place concluded that the draft regulations were logical and appropriate. They will ensure that our legislation continues to operate effectively. I therefore commend these regulations to the House.

6.43 pm

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab) [V]: I thank the Minister for setting out the details of these regulations. Although the UK's departure from the European Union was perhaps the most contentious issue of our generation and an outcome that I am on the record as having fought very hard indeed to prevent, these regulations are a non-contentious consequence of that departure, and the Minister will be glad to know that we will not oppose them.

As the Minister set out, these regulations are intended to ensure the proper functioning of UK law in relation to adoption and teacher misconduct now that article 3 of the e-commerce directive, or the country of origin principle, has ceased to apply in the UK, having left the transition period. They give force to the termination of the agreement with EEA states around digital trade by information society services or online service providers.

In the light of changes to our relationship with the EU, it is necessary to remove the country of origin principle from the 2005 e-commerce directive regulations in so far as they affect matters in scope of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 relating to the proper arrangement and advertisement of adoption services. Similarly, the Education Act 2002 must be amended to remove the same principle from the offence of publishing information in breach of reporting restrictions around allegations of teacher misconduct involving pupils. With the e-commerce directive no longer effective in the UK, it is right and proper that online service providers that commit offences under the Adoption and Children Act 2002 and the Education Act 2002 are liable for prosecution in the UK, and that teachers, children and parents are afforded the necessary legal protections. We welcome the Government's reaffirmation of this, along with the principle that the state has the authority to arrange and oversee adoptions.

The draft regulations were first laid in June 2019 for the purposes of addressing deficiencies in our laws that would arise from leaving the EU without a deal. As much as I wanted and campaigned for the UK to remain inside the EU, a Brexit deal was always preferable to no deal, and I am glad that these regulations have at least been brought under the former scenario, rather than the latter. However, it would have been even better if the deal had not been secured at the last possible moment, with details published just a handful of days before the end of the transition period on 31 December 2020 and MPs recalled to vote on the deal the day before new year's eve. In this context, it is extremely important that online service providers and people affected by their services are not negatively impacted by changes such as the removal of the e-commerce directive and the introduction of a new regime in digital trade as a result of the Government's incompetence, having left it so late to complete their Brexit negotiations and release details of the new arrangements.

[Tulip Siddiq]

Online service providers must be given clear information, guidance and time to understand new law and to make any arrangements to comply with it. It is important in this case, as the regulations that we are discussing relate to upholding the legal protections afforded to children and birth parents with respect to arranging and advertising adoptions, and to teachers with respect to their rights where allegations of an offence are made by, or on behalf of, a pupil.

Although there is no change of policy as a direct result of these regulations, I would none the less like to ask the Minister a series of questions. First, what steps have the Government taken to ensure that EEA-based online service providers operating in the areas here are aware of their new obligations under UK law? Similarly, what actions have been taken to ensure that providers that are UK-based but provide services in an EEA country understand that they must follow that country's laws with respect to any services provided there? Secondly, what powers exist to enforce teacher misconduct reporting restrictions and adoption advertising prohibitions in a situation where information is published in breach of these rules by a UK-based online service provider in an EEA state? Must the teachers, children and birth parents affected rely solely on the EEA state's laws, or are other legal protections available? Finally, what assessment have the Government made of the effectiveness of the regulation of online service providers when it comes to the arrangement of adoptions, and publishing offences in the field of adoption and education, in particular when those offences are committed outside the UK? I thank the Minister in advance for her consideration of my points and questions.

6.48 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP) [V]: The regulations relate to the Education Act 2002 and the Electronic Commerce Directive (Adoption and Children Act 2002) Regulations 2005. The Education Act 2002 relates wholly to England and Wales, and therefore does not affect devolved interests. As regards the 2005 regulations, which relate to adoption offences, the proposed statutory instrument removes the EU reciprocal arrangement. With this SI, any non-UK online service provider operating a service in Scotland would be prosecuted in accordance with the law applicable in Scotland. [*Inaudible.*]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Can you hear me Carol? I am afraid that we have lost your audio. I call Jim Shannon, and then we will go back to Carol Monaghan.

6.50 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) [V]: My comments on the regulations, although brief, are vital, and I look forward to the Minister's response. I understand that the amendments to the Education Act 2002 relate to the provision in schedule 11B to that Act, which supplements section 141G with regards to publishing a matter in breach of restrictions, and on reporting alleged offences by teachers under section 141F in part 3 of the Act. Although those measures extend to England and Wales only, I seek clarity on whether steps have been taken with counterparts in the Northern Ireland Assembly, and Minister Peter Weir, to ensure that this legislation,

which seeks to address failures of retained EU law to operate effectively, and other deficiencies arising from the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union, will also be remedied in Northern Ireland as a matter of urgency. What discussions have taken place with the Minister in Northern Ireland to ensure that that happens?

It is clear that these SIs may be a check box exercise of sorts for Brexit, but we must also do as we have done, seek to address failings in current legislation, and make improvements. As always, it is imperative that those changes are UK-wide, and that we are operating as closely matched as possible. The bottom line is that I wish to find out whether Northern Ireland will be subject to the same regulations, and whether discussions have taken place to ensure that we are in line. Importantly, as I always say, we are better together as the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Let us see whether we can get Carol back. Carol, can we try now?

Carol Monaghan [V]: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am not entirely sure how far we got, so I will start at the point I think I had reached. This SI would mean that any non-UK online service provider operating a service within Scotland would be prosecuted in accordance with the law applicable in Scotland. The result is that prosecution of activities within Scotland will be governed by the Adoption and Children Act 2002, and the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007. This issue involves devolved and reserved matters, We agree with the general policy rationale, so we will not oppose the regulations this evening, but the Scottish Government should have had their consent sought, even if they had indicated that they supported the policy principles and would likely have granted consent.

Why have the UK Government not requested that consent? In light of the lack of such a request, will the Minister confirm that the effect of the regulations in Scotland will be consigned only to the regulation of non-UK online service providers and activities in Scotland, as relates to the Adoption and Children Act 2002, and the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am pleased that we could get back to you, Carol. We saw and heard you loud and clear.

6.53 pm

Vicky Ford: I thank everyone for their contributions to this debate. It is good to hear that the shadow Minister will not be opposing the regulations, as to do so would potentially have put children at risk. I am glad she agrees that it is better to have left the EU with a deal than without one, but I am sorry that I did not hear her put on the record her thanks to all those who negotiated right up to the deadline in order to secure a deal. I would like to put on the record my thanks to all those from both sides of the negotiations, including the EU negotiators, who worked through that holiday period to ensure that we could have as smooth an exit as possible.

The shadow Minister asked what had been done to inform people of changes to the law, so let me be extremely clear that the underlying law has not changed. What has changed is where people will be prosecuted if they breach the underlying law. That is extremely important

and it should be clear to the shadow Minister, so I am surprised that her lawyers have not got that extremely important point. All that is changing is where people will be prosecuted.

The regulations do not diminish in any way the offences I have described as set out both in the Education Act 2002 and in the 2005 electronic commerce directive regulations. They do not impact in any way on the policy behind those regulations. The identity of teachers who are accused by a pupil of an offence will be protected until the point at which relevant legal proceedings have begun and children in care will continue to be kept safe and protected by our ensuring that arranging and advertising adoption can legally only be undertaken by adoption agencies.

The regulations simply fix the deficiencies of retained EU law. They will ensure the enforcement of UK laws when the offence is committed in the UK, irrespective of the country in the European economic area in which the online service providers are based. My understanding is that the devolved Administrations were consulted—I did have discussion on this—and Northern Ireland did give its consent. On the point about malpractice, that is covered only in England and Wales and there is a devolved point in this regard, but I can assure colleagues that the Administrations were contacted as part of this exercise. On that basis, I commend the regulations to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): We will now suspend for a short period to sanitise just the Government Dispatch Box.

6.57 pm

Sitting suspended.

Pensions

6.59 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): I beg to move,

That the draft Automatic Enrolment (Earnings Trigger and Qualifying Earnings Band) Order 2021, which was laid before this House on 20 January, be approved.

It is a great privilege to be here in the House to move the motion. This order reflects the conclusions of this year's annual review of the automatic enrolment earnings threshold required by the Pensions Act 2008. This is the ninth annual review. The review considered the earnings trigger and the qualifying earnings band for the tax year 2021-22. The earnings trigger determines the point when a qualifying worker becomes eligible to be automatically enrolled into a qualifying workplace pension. The qualifying earnings band determines the earnings upon which workers and employers pay contributions into a workplace pension. This order sets a new upper limit for the qualifying earnings band and is effective from 6 April 2021. The lower earnings limit is not changed. Similarly, the earnings trigger is not changed.

The Government's commitment to automatic enrolment was demonstrated through the support for the statutory minimum employer pension contributions originally included in the coronavirus job retention scheme. I thank everyone who continues to support automatic enrolment, whether that is the participating employers or, more particularly, the 10 million-plus employees who are saving 8% per annum. I can confirm that we will be pursuing the 2017 automatic enrolment review and bringing that in in the mid-2020s. The 2019 stats show the success that is automatic enrolment, with women in workplace pension participation now at 86%—that was 40% in 2012—and young people between 22 and 29 in workplace pension participation now at 86%; that was 35%. I commend the order to the House.

7.1 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his remarks. Auto-enrolment has proven to be one of the most positive developments for savers and in securing people's long-term prosperity in recent memory. It was a Labour Government in 2008 who first introduced legislation to require auto-enrolment, and millions of people have benefited since. It is heartening that the current Government appreciate the value of the scheme, and are committed to continuing and, indeed, expanding it.

The current economic climate is a tough one. The coronavirus pandemic has left many employers and employees facing unexpectedly difficult decisions. In this light, it is right that the Government focus on ensuring the long-term sustainability of schemes and helping employers weather the immediate crisis. It is for this reason that Labour will not be voting against the statutory instrument tonight, even though it only represents a relatively small real-terms increase in the number of employees set to be automatically enrolled by their employers into pension schemes and a small real-terms increase in the earnings that employers must pay contributions on. I would like to take this opportunity to urge the Government not to abandon the ambitious spirit in which the original legislation was introduced in 2008, and to make sure that, once the economy has

[Matt Rodda]

regained its strength, the Government do all they can to ensure workers are saving more and are saving earlier for their retirement.

Many experts have made the case for lowering the qualifying earnings threshold and, indeed, the minimum age. The People's Pension, for example, has endorsed proposals to do so. It argues that millions of new savers would be created, many of whom would be women and people from ethnic minority backgrounds. Similarly, the Association of British Insurers found that employees would be able to save an additional £2.6 billion a year if the earnings trigger was scrapped. At a glance through *Hansard*, we can see that a large number of colleagues, many of whom have expertise in this area, from all major parties and in both Houses have also called for these changes. In fact, I remind the Government that they made a commitment themselves in 2017, in the review of auto-enrolment, among other things to remove the lower earnings limit and to reduce the age threshold for automatic enrolment to 18 by the mid-2020s. It would be disappointing if this goal could not be met on time or soon after, and I urge the Government to clarify their position on this issue.

It is also important that the Government are clear about the implications of freezing the earnings trigger and only modestly increasing the upper limit for the qualifying earnings band. Labour has pushed for this in previous years, pointing out last year, for example, that 37% of female workers and 28% of black and minority ethnic workers are still not eligible for the scheme. This is an area of pensions policy that I urge the Minister to look at most closely.

I would like to use this opportunity to provide some context for the decision that we are being asked to make tonight. We will see how the roll-out of the pensions dashboard in the not-too-distant future may benefit savers and we must do all we can to ensure that this service lives up to its potential. Similarly, it is right to work hard to continue the fight against pension scams, to increase the take-up of pension credit and to give savers more transparency around their investments. I would also like to take this opportunity to remind the Minister of a commitment that he made to my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), about meeting the Allied Steel and Wire pensioners group, which is very concerned about its pension scheme.

I should also say that Labour supports the pensions triple lock as a way of ensuring a fairer state pension, and that we will be working hard in the coming months and years to continue to push the Government to take bold steps to use the economic might of pension funds to support the fight against climate change. I have raised these points to emphasise that there is much to do in the pensions and savings sector, and because I believe that it is important to consider the whole picture when taking big decisions such as the one being made today.

Labour wants to make this the best country in which to grow old. If we are to achieve that goal, we must be ambitious and build on the success of auto-enrolment to make it as good as it possibly can be. We should address the other issues that I identified earlier as part of that work.

7.6 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): The statutory instrument before the House tonight is yet another example of how the UK Government are failing our pensioners, causing some of the most vulnerable to slip between the cracks, proving that pensioners are so often an afterthought for this Conservative Government.

Despite repeated calls from the SNP, the UK Government are refusing to lower the earnings trigger for pensions automatic enrolment. The fundamental issue with this is that workers on lower wages will continue to lose out on vital retirement savings. This is yet another example of the Tories pushing through policies that see the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

We in the SNP have continually called on the UK Government to remove the £10,000 earning threshold for pensioners' automatic enrolment in 2021 and 2022. In the Committees for this instrument, my SNP colleagues have made clear our concerns. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) outlined that the £10,000 earnings cap is unsuitable and that the UK Government have given very little evidence as to why the £10,000 threshold was put in place. Currently, that £10,000 threshold for automatic enrolment means that workers on lower wages, either in low-paying jobs or working part time, will lose out on retirement savings.

At this juncture, I want to thank colleagues at the Association of British Insurers for their very helpful briefing note in advance of today's debate. The ABI rightly identifies the gender and ethnicity pensions gap, which is baked into our pensions legislation. Put simply, the threshold that we are debating tonight is a kick in the teeth for women who are disproportionately low paid or in part-time work and are more likely to experience later life poverty. To put the gender divide in context, we know that the average pension pot for a woman aged 65 is one fifth of that of a 65-year-old man, and women receive £29,000 less state pension than men over a 20-year period. Indeed, this deficit is set to continue, all else being equal, only closing by 3% by 2060. Extending the coverage of automatic enrolment further by reducing the earnings threshold to a lower level, ideally the first pound, would bring hundreds of thousands of people, mostly women, into pension saving.

Consideration also needs to be given to the ethnicity pensions gap, with the latest Office for National Statistics data showing a stark contrast between the private pension wealth of white British savers and savers from ethnic minorities. Arguably, this instrument will only exacerbate that gap further, causing many women and those from black and minority ethnic groups to experience later life poverty.

In addition, when we look at the impact of this pandemic, many of the effects will be far-reaching. The jobs market has already completely changed, with more people having to take on low-paid and part-time work, and it is only right that these people are not penalised for a situation that is demonstrably outwith their control. No one could have predicted this global pandemic and the many resulting consequences that have arisen for our economy.

I am here not just to highlight the problems, because we in the SNP have offered clear solutions. The UK Government should remove the lower limit—the qualifying

earnings band—so that contributions are payable from the first pound earned, lower the age threshold from 22 to 18, and expand the contribution rates beyond the 8% statutory minimum. The UK Government must begin to address the faults in pensions policy and not further exacerbate the current issues.

From WASPI—Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign—to frozen pensions for UK citizens living abroad, the £10,000 earnings cap is another example of poor pensions policy from a Tory Government that we in Scotland did not vote for. It is vital that workers on lower wages do not continue to lose out on their retirement savings and find themselves in pensioner poverty. It is time for the UK Government to step up to the plate and support pensioners by giving them dignity in retirement.

7.10 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab) [V]: I understand the case for stability in the course of the pandemic; that is represented by the order and I would not quarrel with that at all. However, the order does raise a number of issues about the Government's longer-term intentions on auto-enrolment, which others have raised and which the Minister touched on, and I would like to ask him about that.

On freezing the earnings trigger, again, £10,000 probably represents a very modest increase in the number of people brought into auto-enrolment. The Government's analysis refers to another 8,000 people, of whom 72% will be women, but the order does not represent any real progress towards the changes set out in the 2017 review, which, as my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) reminded us from the Front Bench, would see contributions made for all employees aged 18 and over from the first £1 that they earn. When the review was published, the Government said, and the Minister reiterated it this evening, that the ambition was to implement those changes before the mid-2020s. We are now halfway from 2017 to the mid-2020s, and it would be helpful if the Minister was able to give some indication to us of when the legislation necessary to achieve that will be made. Is it the Government's aim to legislate for those changes in the pensions Bill, which the Minister has said he wants to introduce perhaps next year? Is that when we can expect concrete steps to be made?

The previous Work and Pensions Committee recommended in its auto-enrolment report that, as part of their review, the Government should consider

“approaches to increasing contributions beyond the statutory minimum of 8% of qualifying earnings, including mandatory increases in employee and employer contribution rates and means of encouraging greater voluntary contributions”.

Can we look forward to progress along those lines in a 2022 pension schemes Bill as well?

As the Minister knows, and this has not previously been raised in this debate, the Supreme Court recently found that Uber drivers are workers for the purpose of section 54 of the National Minimum Wage Act 1998. That means that Uber drivers are entitled to a minimum wage for the period when they have the app switched on in the area covered by their licence. If they and other gig economy workers are entitled to the minimum wage, they may well also be eligible for auto-enrolment on the terms set out in the order. Auto-enrolment contributions might well need to be paid retrospectively in relation to them. Will the Minister set out what the Government's

view about that is? Are they considering how gig economy workers could be brought into auto-enrolment? Is there a need for legislation to address this, or is it the Government's view that the existing legislation can do the job?

The Work and Pensions Committee has now launched the second of our three-stage inquiry to assess the impact of the pension freedoms five years on from their introduction, following the first part, which was on pension scams, which I hope we will be able to produce a report on later this month. The third part of the inquiry, which we will launch later in the year, will look at these issues around auto-enrolment for gig economy workers such as Uber drivers and for self-employed people more generally.

The Government launched a series of trials and research exercises around enabling retirement saving for the self-employed at the end of 2018. That followed a report from the Select Committee at the end of 2017, “Self-employment and the gig economy”, which said:

“Low levels of retirement saving amongst the self-employed risk storing up grave problems of potential hardship and reliance on the welfare state in later life. While auto-enrolment for employees has been a great success, current structures are not encouraging sufficient pension saving by the self-employed. The idea of using an opt-out system on tax returns to encourage greater contribution to pensions is an interesting one that merits further consideration.”

Can the Minister, following the trials, which began a couple of years ago now, indicate what the Government's plans are for extending the success of auto-enrolment to the self-employed?

Those trials involved: marketing interventions aimed at people who previously saved, such as those being automatically enrolled while employed, to encourage them to continue their saving; marketing interventions using trusted third parties for the self-employed, such as trade bodies and trade unions, to promote the value of saving and to provide an easy connection to an appropriate savings vehicle; and behavioural prompts, including testing messages combined with prompts through invoicing services or the banking sector to try to engage self-employed people to think about starting regular saving at a point when they are receiving their income.

What has been learned from those activities over the past couple of years? When will the Government publish the findings? When does the Minister intend to take an initiative based on those findings for the benefit of self-employed people?

7.16 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): The Government's annual automatic enrolment evaluation report is a testament to the success of automatic enrolment, with the most recent edition from 2019 showing that more than 10.2 million employees have been automatically enrolled across more than 1.6 million employers. As a result, the number of eligible employees with a workplace pension has skyrocketed from 10.7 million, or 55% in 2012, to 18.7 million—nearly 90%—in 2018. That is very much to be commended.

I have spoken before about the importance of intergenerational fairness in our pensions policy. The decisions we take now will continue to have an impact decades down the line. The automatic enrolment policy means not just that people in the next 10 or 20 years will be better off in retirement, but that the generation who are just entering the workforce now will be, too.

[Wendy Chamberlain]

As other Members have referenced, what is perhaps most notable about this order is not what it changes, but what it does not, with only the upper limit for the qualifying earnings band being revised, but not the lower limit or the earnings trigger, which the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda), and the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), referenced. While I understand the rationale for making this decision, which the Minister set out in his opening remarks, it is important that the progress made over the past decade does not start to slow down. In the words of the Government's 2017 review, we must "maintain the momentum".

The 2017 review contained proposals to lower the age threshold down to 18 and to abolish the lower earnings limit, with an estimated target date of delivery in the mid-2020s. We are now nearly four years on from that review and, as the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), mentioned, we have seen no change. Although "mid-2020s" can potentially be a bit elastic, that target is inching closer and today's statutory instrument does not change the lower earnings limit either. Like others, I would be grateful if the Minister updated the House on progress towards the changes.

Another area that the review highlighted was the gaps in coverage, which particularly impact on people with multiple low-paid jobs and young people. The recent Supreme Court judgment on Uber workers has profound implications for the gig economy. Like the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, I would be grateful if the Minister set out how his Department intends to respond to that ruling in respect of auto-enrolment and set out a timescale.

A reduction in the earnings threshold for automatic enrolment would also help the ongoing problem of the gender pensions gap, and I thank the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) for tabling an early-day motion on that very topic. According to the Chartered Insurance Institute, the average pension pot for a woman aged 65 is just one fifth of the size of average pension pot for a 65-year-old man. Prospect estimated the gender pensions gap to be 39.5% when measured in terms of income, which is more than twice the size of the gender pay gap.

One factor in that inequality is that people with a salary below the earnings threshold are disproportionately women. More broadly, Members will be concerned to see reports in the press by the former Lib Dem Pensions Minister Steve Webb that thousands of women have been underpaid their state pension, so we would be grateful if the Minister updated the House on that issue, as well as setting out his plans to reduce not only the gender pensions gap but other gaps, including the gap in relation to those from black and other minority ethnic groups. Will he set out whether the Government will move forward with changes to automatic enrolment to help to deal with that? As I said at the beginning of my speech, automatic enrolment has been a success.

In the debate on the Ministerial and Other Maternity Allowances Bill, there was much discussion about the use of impact assessments so, finally, I would be keen to hear what assessment the Department for Work and

Pensions has made of the impact of today's changes on women and other minority groups. I look forward to the Minister's winding-up speech.

7.20 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) [V]: It is clear that automatic enrolment for pensions has been a good thing for many people, so I am pleased to add my support for the measure. The Library briefing puts it succinctly:

"The policy has reversed the decline in workplace pension saving. The rollout of automatic enrolment from 2012 onwards has led to a tenfold increase in total membership of defined contribution occupational schemes, from 2.1 million in 2011 to 21 million in 2019."

That is a success story if ever there was one. The briefing continues:

"Actively contributing membership rose from a low point of 0.9 million active members in 2011 to 10.6 million members in 2019."

Success indeed! Employers who had to furlough staff because of coronavirus could claim help for pensions contributions before 1 August 2020. Since then, however, they have had to meet costs themselves both for furloughed hours and hours worked. May I ask the Minister whether that will be looked at and changed or reviewed, as it has left some employers in a difficult position? While many have been able to access grant schemes for their closed businesses, anyone who owns more than one shop in Northern Ireland only receives a grant for one business—no matter that their staff could be employed in four shops or even more.

There is absolutely pressure on employers at this time, which will increase if staff earn less than the required lower limit. I personally believe that while we should look at the lower earnings limit, as other Members have said, I am thankful that that is reviewed annually. That is important, and it is good to see that in place. This is not the time to put more pressure and obligations on employers, and I believe that this year we should keep the limit as it is. Some companies will need help to get back on their feet for the next six months, and will find themselves in completely new circumstances next year. Making a small employer's contribution for a staff member on low hours should not be a final nail in the coffin.

I support everyone who works to have access to a private pension scheme, but I truly do not believe that this is the time to implement a change. I hope that the Minister will confirm in his response that the Government will support employers in every possible way over the coming months, knowing that we will reap the rewards with thriving businesses in the years to come if we sow and till now. Never has that been more necessary, as the covid-19 pandemic has illustrated.

7.23 pm

Guy Opperman: It is a great honour and privilege to respond to the debate. As always with pensions, while we are engaging in a debate on a specific topic colleagues across the House never miss the opportunity to raise all manner of issues on pensions, to which I have been asked to respond. I am delighted to do so.

No sooner has Her Majesty signed the Pension Schemes Act 2021 on the dotted line—we thank her tremendously for that, and I thank the House for its endorsement of that wonderful piece of legislation, which will make our pensions safer, better and greener—than colleagues are

urging me to bring forth another pensions Bill to further transform the pensions landscape. I am sure that those on the Treasury Bench, and the Deputy Chief Whip and the pairing Whip, will have taken due attention of that when bids for future legislation are put in.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): In a very practical sense and meaningful way, how do these reforms make a real difference to my constituents in Ipswich?

Guy Opperman: My hon. Friend is a champion for his constituency and rightly raises the importance of what we are doing. I draw his attention to two key points: first, the Pension Schemes Act will make his constituents' pensions safer, better and greener; and secondly, the automatic enrolment reforms that we have brought forward as a coalition Government and then a Conservative Government unquestionably support his constituents, who are saving in their thousands, to the tune of 8% per annum.

Of course, my hon. Friend will be aware that in 2012, approximately 35% of our young people were saving into a workplace pension, and now 86% in his community are doing so. Similarly, women, who were saving at 40%, are now saving, quite obviously, up at 86%, as I outlined earlier.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Very quickly, I have a compliment and a question. The compliment is that, as an MP of 20 years' standing, I know that pensions are one of the most difficult things that we get inquiries on from constituents, and the Minister, when he replies, has a knack for explaining these things in everyday English that is simple to understand. I thank him for that.

Guy Opperman: Stop there!

Mr Francois: My question is this. The very helpful notes that go with the instrument state:

"A full impact assessment has not been produced for this instrument."

We were not expecting "War and Peace". There will be a reason why the Government took that decision; perhaps the Minister will explain it to the House.

Guy Opperman: As always, I am grateful for my right hon. Friend's intervention and support, and for his kind comments. I accept and take any praise that is due, and likewise hope that all Whips have taken due note of that.

Mr Francois: Stop there!

Guy Opperman: Indeed. The practical reality is that I will write to my right hon. Friend with more detail about the impact assessment, but clearly, this is an annual review that is done on an ongoing basis to ensure that the automatic enrolment regulations should be enforced in an appropriate way, and they should be reviewed and assessed in an appropriate way.

Some colleagues have raised matters of the Budget, and I leave that to my right hon. Friend the Chancellor. Similarly, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), whose comments we always appreciate—it is an honour to respond to the great man—asked for a specific assurance that the Government will continue to support employers. I can give him the profound assurance that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor on Wednesday will continue the massive support that this Government have made to employers on an ongoing basis. That will continue.

Clearly, we work on an ongoing basis to implement by the mid-2020s the automatic enrolment review; we continue to work forward on the pensions dashboard; section 125 of the Pension Schemes Act has made a significant difference on pension scams; and we continue to put climate change at the heart of pensions, which are now safer, better and greener under this Government.

Question put and agreed to.

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that Her Majesty has signified her Royal Assent to the following Acts:

Covert Human Intelligence Sources (Criminal Conduct) Act 2021

Ministerial and other Maternity Allowances Act 2021.

We will now suspend for a brief moment in order to sanitise both Dispatch Boxes.

7.29 pm

Sitting suspended.

Income Tax

7.31 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman): I beg to move,

That the draft Major Sporting Events (Income Tax Exemption) Regulations 2021, which were laid before this House on 11 January, be approved.

The draft regulations before us provide an income tax exemption for accredited non-resident individuals who perform duties or services in the UK in relation to the rescheduled UEFA Euro 2020 final tournament. The exemption will apply to any income that an individual receives for duties and services performed in connection with the UK-hosted matches of the final tournament between specific dates in June and July 2021.

The Euros 2020 final tournament ranks second only to the World cup in prestige in the world of football. From 11 June this year, the world's attention will focus on this tournament, which will be held across 12 European cities as part of the celebration of the tournament's 60th anniversary. In particular, there will be matches hosted at Wembley stadium in London and Hampden Park in Glasgow, as 24 nations compete to be the champions of Europe.

I am sure that hon. and right hon. Members will be aware of the Government's commitment to making the UK an attractive location—perhaps the most attractive location for football—in which to host world-class events. Successive Governments have provided income tax exemptions for major sporting events of this kind. Following the success of the 2012 London Olympic and Paralympic games, which showcased the UK's ability to host major events, statutory tax exemptions have been provided for other world-class events, including the 2013 and 2017 UEFA Champions League finals, the 2014 Glasgow Commonwealth games and the 2017 World Athletics championships. I am confident that Members across the House will agree that it is in keeping with Government policy to provide a similar exemption for this exceptional event.

The draft regulations make use of the powers introduced in the Finance Act 2014 that enable the Treasury to make regulations providing for an income tax exemption in relation to a major sporting event. As the UK continues to be at the forefront of hosting world-class events, I would like to emphasise that the policy conditions, as they are described in the Treasury, for providing a tax exemption are the same as those that have been applied for previous events.

Mr Deputy Speaker, you will be aware that a tax exemption is reserved only for the most exceptional events, with consideration on an event-by-event basis. In order to be considered for a tax exemption, an event must satisfy three conditions: it must demonstrate the highest level of world sport; it must be internationally mobile; and the granting of the exemption must be a necessary condition of a bid to host the event. I am positive that the House will agree that the UEFA Euros final tournament falls well within those criteria.

If I may, I will turn to the details of the regulations. An exemption from UK income tax will apply to non-resident players, officials and certain other UEFA-accredited individuals in respect of income arising in connection with the UK-hosted matches of the final tournament.

The exemption will apply to income arising from duties and services performed in the UK between 1 June and 13 July. That allows for 10 days before the event commences, so that the exemption can cover any duties performed in connection with the matches held in the UK, such as advance planning or training camps.

The income tax exemption for the 2021 Euros supports our commitment to make the UK a global leader for world-class major sporting events and demonstrates what we can achieve across the breadth of the UK. I am sure that these regulations and the objective they serve will enjoy cross-party support. I hope colleagues will therefore join me in supporting these regulations, which I commend to the House.

7.36 pm

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Opposition on these regulations. As we have heard, this statutory instrument relates to the Euro 2020 football championships, which were delayed by covid-19 into 2021. Although I am speaking as a shadow Minister, this subject is literally close to home for people in my constituency; from many places near where I live, including the top of Horsenden Hill, people get a full view of Wembley's arch, under which several of the games are set to be played, including the semi-finals and the final.

As we have heard from the Minister, the purpose of these regulations is to create an exemption from income tax for income earned in the UK by certain non-resident individuals in connection with football matches held in the UK as part of the tournament. The Opposition recognise that this income tax exemption was a condition of the bidding process for all countries wishing to host matches in the UEFA Euro 2020 finals tournament. We also recognise that the formal requirement to grant an income tax exemption in hosting the Euro 2020 finals is consistent with the approach taken in comparable events hosted in the UK in the past, such as the World Athletics championships 2017, the UEFA Champions League final 2017 and the London anniversary games in 2016. We will therefore not oppose this statutory instrument, and we look forward to enjoying the matches this summer.

7.37 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP) [V]: A belated happy St David's Day to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and to all hon. Members and staff of the House.

The Scottish National party will not oppose these regulations. Applying them to the delayed Euro 2020 finals is clearly an appropriate use of the power that has existed for a number of years to exempt from income tax liabilities anyone who works here for a relatively short time because they play for, coach or are otherwise involved with one of the national squads, or are UEFA-accredited staff and journalists. It is my understanding that this courtesy is often extended by other countries that host major sporting events; indeed, as we have heard, Governments of all the host countries had to sign up to this to take part in the bidding. I suppose we should welcome the fact that on this occasion the Government have actually honoured promises they made to our European neighbours; quite a few businesses in my constituency and elsewhere in Scotland wish that promises made to them were worth quite as much.

Clearly, because of covid, the tournament may not be the spectacle it might have been, but I hope that by the summer, the Governments of not only Scotland and the UK but all the qualifying countries have the pandemic sufficiently under control to allow the matches to be played—possibly not in front of full capacity crowds, but certainly with a big enough crowd at each game to give them the atmosphere that Europe’s top footballers clearly deserve. I can see that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is waiting to speak, so let me say to him and his colleagues from Northern Ireland that I am sorry that Northern Ireland did not quite make it through a very difficult qualifying group to make it four UK nations out of four taking part.

Given that it is St David’s day, may I wish Wales the very best of luck with their start to the tournament? I also send my very genuine and sincere good wishes to England, as they strive to finish second to Scotland and qualify on our coattails in group D. Who knows? We might be able to give the world’s media not just an exemption from income tax while they are here, but a truly historic sporting occasion—and not just because Scotland’s men’s football team is at a major tournament, because I can remember when that was quite a common occurrence. We might show the media something that has only ever happened once in history; they might be able to report on Scotland beating England at Twickenham and at Wembley in the same year. Now, that is something that I think we all look forward to in June this year.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): As a Welshman, I am not one to dwell on recent sporting victories that took place over the weekend.

7.40 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) [V]: I thank the Minister for his comments and introduction. I have always been a massive football fan, supporting the greatest club in the league, and I always support the home nations. As the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) said, we in Northern Ireland have narrowly missed out again; we hope for better times. But I am excited about the rescheduling of Euro 2020. Although we might not be able to have the usual full stadium, we should all be able fully to support the home nations—I will be supporting them—from the comfort of our living rooms.

This statutory instrument, which I support, is merely one cog in ensuring that players can come, play and not be penalised through their wages, by creating an income tax exemption from 1 June 2021 until two days after the final match. With matches being hosted in the United Kingdom, and Wembley hosting the final, I am hopeful that football is coming home, and that there will be a boost to local economies at every venue. That is much needed. Hopefully, if all continues to go well, bed nights and safe tourism may well be another benefit of the beautiful game coming home.

Does the Minister agree that having an exemption until two days after the last match gives sufficient time for everything to be resolved, or would he consider allowing a few more days, in case, God forbid—I put this very apprehensively—any player or coach has to quarantine for whatever reason? I hope that the Minister will be able to address that question.

7.42 pm

Jesse Norman: It is testimony to the unifying quality of football as a game that we can have such a unanimity of view across the different nations of this country. I thank the hon. Member for Ealing North (James Murray) for the Opposition’s support. I also thank the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) for his and his party’s support; I am not going to comment on the relative order in the finals between England and Scotland, but we shall see. I thank very much the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who asks if we will consider a few more days of relief. I thank him for his question. He has put it on the record here in Parliament, and we will of course give it consideration.

It is a great sadness to me personally that it is unlikely that the England team will feature any members of the Hereford FC team, now making their way triumphantly towards the finals—I hope, in due course—of the FA trophy, but I can say that Members of this House will, I hope, have the joy of seeing players of the quality of a Kane, a Rashford, a Mount, a Calvert-Lewin and a McTominay. With that, I hope that we can all have a fantastic tournament, ably supported by our tax system.

Question put and agreed to.

Business without Debate

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Ordered,

That Lia Nici be discharged from the Backbench Business Committee and David Johnston be added.—(*Bill Wiggan, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

FINANCE

Ordered,

That Tommy Sheppard be discharged from the Finance Committee and Marion Fellows be added.—(*Bill Wiggan, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

PETITIONS

Ordered,

That Theresa Villiers be discharged from the Petitions Committee and Matt Vickers be added.—(*Bill Wiggan, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

ARMED FORCES BILL

Ordered,

That Dr Andrew Murrison be discharged from the Select Committee on the Armed Forces Bill and Sarah Dines be added.—(*Bill Wiggan, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

Ordered,

That Sara Britcliffe be discharged from the Women and Equalities Committee and Ben Bradley be added.—(*Bill Wiggan, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

7.47 pm

Sitting suspended.

Fire Safety Remediation: Leaseholders

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

7.49 pm

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): Happy St David's Day, Mr Deputy Speaker. I rise to speak about the ongoing issues faced by leaseholders in my constituency and across the country in securing funds for the remediation of unsafe non-aluminium composite material cladding systems through the building safety fund. I am pleased to have secured this debate on this important issue, which continues to cause great distress to leaseholders in my constituency. I am aware that many Members would like to contribute but will be unable to do so because of the virtual format. I will, however, endeavour to cover a number of points that those Members would have liked to raise, and I hope that the Minister will be generous with his time to allow others concerned by this important issue to place their points on the record.

Uncovered by the tragedy of Grenfell, now three and a half years ago, the process of remediating unsafe cladding on high-rise buildings has unfortunately become a lengthy and complex saga. I want to focus specifically today on the experience of leaseholders in non-ACM-clad buildings in my constituency. I want to highlight the ongoing difficulties faced by building owners and residents in accessing the building safety fund, as there are still fundamental questions about its scale and administration. I also want to discuss buildings below 18 metres and encourage the Government to address the flawed building regulation system that the ongoing cladding scandal has exposed. Most urgently, however, this is a safety issue. Through no fault of their own, residents find themselves in potentially unsafe homes and vulnerable to huge costs that may still not be covered by Government funding. It is these residents—constituents in my city and across the country—to whom I would like the Minister to provide assurance this evening.

There are a number of buildings with unsafe non-ACM cladding in my city. Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government figures tell us that so far 23 of those have made applications to the building safety fund. Residents in these buildings have suddenly found themselves in unsafe homes and potentially liable to astronomical costs for remediation. This lets down everyone, from first-time buyers to pensioners. One of my constituents put it best when she wrote to me recently:

“I may be asked to contribute between 20,000 to 30,000 pounds towards remediation. I am retired and I have very limited income. I will not be able to raise this sort of capital. I am very worried about whether I'll lose my apartment. I did not cause this problem.”

In many cases, these leaseholders are unable to sell their homes because of inconsistent EWS1 processes and so are consigned to long and nerve-racking waits to see if their building will obtain Government funding. In addition to the obvious financial pressures, I do not believe that the mental health and wellbeing implications have been properly discussed.

Since this debate was originally secured, the Government have taken welcome steps forward. The creation and enhancement of the building safety fund is welcome, but there are still large holes in the safety net. I have

been contacted by leaseholders and property management companies who have registered by the original July deadline and have been given no information on whether they will be invited to make an application to the fund, no sense of the length of time they will have to wait for a decision, and no direct means of contact to obtain clarity on the situation. Separately, Portsmouth City Council has registered 14 blocks with the fund. The Government have rejected 11 of these so far, some on spurious grounds such as their being deemed to be in a “non-critical location”. Lord Greenhalgh recently suggested that there are about 1,700 non-ACM-clad buildings in need of remediation work. However, there has been no proper assessment of the number of buildings across the country that need work. The first come, first served nature of the fund means that applications will not be considered or prioritised based on risk, and there is no hard deadline for the completion of works.

Progressing remediation work on unsafe cladding systems must be an urgent priority if we are to avoid further catastrophes following the Grenfell Tower fire. It is therefore disappointing that the administration of the fund itself is preventing vital safety work from commencing and stopping leaseholders moving on with their lives. In the meantime, they have found themselves liable for yet more temporary safety measures, such as the 24-hour waking watch. While the Government have now established a welcome relief fund to cover the costs of this, progress on remediation has been painfully slow.

Health and safety must be the priority, and Ministers should focus on the rapid disbursement of funds in the immediate term, while pursuing developers and recovery costs where possible. I wrote to Lord Greenhalgh summarising these issues on 8 December, but disappointingly have received no response, despite efforts to follow up. I would therefore be grateful if the Minister would provide an answer as to whether he will make regular updates on the processing of applications through the building safety fund, how the distribution of funds is being prioritised, and what steps he will take to speed up payments.

The prospectus for the building safety fund also states that buildings under 18 metres in height will not be covered. This was of little comfort to those in the buildings affected in my constituency. The loan scheme recently introduced by the Government will relieve residents of having to pay a lump sum up front, but ultimately it still leaves them liable to pay to fix a problem that they did not create and that will likely mean they will still struggle to sell. The Government have drawn an arbitrary distinction on this issue, which represents a piecemeal approach to making these buildings safe. If cladding is unsafe, it is surely unsafe regardless of the height of the building it sits on. The building safety fund should therefore apply to buildings of any height. The Housing Minister recently suggested data was being collected on buildings between 11 and 18 metres high. I therefore ask him to update us on the progress of that work, whether it includes the buildings in my constituency and whether he plans to extend the fund to cover these buildings.

Last week, this House considered amendments from the other place on the Fire Safety Bill. The Government had an opportunity to back Labour amendments that would have absolved leaseholders of burdensome costs, and set things right for the future by placing robust requirements on building owners and managers to

implement recommendations from phase 1 of the Grenfell inquiry. The Government voted against both, so we have now reached the absurd situation in which this Government have voted against implementing the recommendations of their own review, which they promised to accept. The Building Safety Bill, which does include long-overdue reforms of the wider sector, is still without a date for First Reading.

That brings me to my final point. Residents and building owners find themselves in these situations because of a systemic failure of regulation stretching back decades. These buildings were constructed with materials that were approved at the time. There is now little incentive for anyone in the long chain of those involved, from contractors to regulators to building owners, to take responsibility for sorting out this important issue, because it now comes with a hefty price tag. Some developers have now tacitly accepted the need for a levy and they are to be commended, but it is not a holistic solution.

Since the tragedy of Grenfell, successive Governments have been irresponsibly slow at tackling this issue. Residents' groups, campaigners and Members of this House have had to drag Ministers kicking and screaming to take responsibility for protecting residents in high-rise blocks with all types of cladding. And we still are not there. While recent, if overdue, efforts made by the Government to provide funding are welcome, we have yet to see an unequivocal commitment to removing costs from leaseholders, disbursing available funds as quickly as possible and recovering them from industry at a later date. On this last issue, the Government are not using important convening power to set expectations of developers, contractors and insurers that would benefit leaseholders who have been affected.

I would like to conclude by summarising my asks of the Minister. First, the Government must finally lift the cost burden from leaseholders and redouble efforts to recover funds from the sector. They should distribute funds as quickly as possible and set a hard timeline for the completion of remediation works. They must recognise and repay interim funds in full. Finally, they must ensure that legislation includes a clear regulatory framework with a common standard to make sure this never happens again.

Building safety issues threaten to turn dream homes into a nightmare for my constituents. The Government must keep to their promise that leaseholders will not pay for the consequences of their cladding crisis.

7.59 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I am very grateful for the opportunity to add to this debate tonight. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan) for his excellent speech, which covered a wide range of very serious issues that are faced by residents in towns and cities across the country. In my constituency in Reading and Woodley, we have exactly the same set of problems, which he so eloquently outlined, affecting the city of Portsmouth. I understand from colleagues across the whole country that this is a serious national problem. Indeed, it is fair to say that it is a national scandal. Three years after Grenfell, we still do not have the full set of effective measures in place to take action against these terrible fire safety problems.

Briefly, let me thank the Minister for the work that the Government are doing on some of the taller buildings, but one or two very serious issues remain. I do not want to repeat all the points made by my hon. Friend, but, I will, if I may, address one or two key points that particularly affect local people in Reading and Woodley. As many people will know, our town is growing. We are not a city, but a large town, with many taller buildings in our town centre. That is only likely to increase over time as greater development takes place in the Thames Valley. The same is true across the whole of Berkshire and, indeed, across much of England and the wider UK.

I wish to make two or three key points about the nature of the problem and the range of issues that go beyond the very tall blocks with the Grenfell-style cladding. First, on the height of the blocks, it is important to underline the point made by hon. Friend that there are many blocks under 18 metres. Indeed, the majority of blocks in Reading town centre of any description, whether or not they have problems, are way below that height. However, they are tall enough to make it difficult for people to escape from them if there were an emergency. What we are seeing in our area is a number of issues in blocks of that height—from Grenfell-style ACM cladding, from other types of cladding and, indeed, from other problems.

First, I ask the Minister to reassess the difficulties facing residents living in blocks of under 18 metres. They are being offered a loan, which, as my hon. Friend said, is some assistance, but many of these residents do not have large financial resources, so this is still a very significant imposition on them, and it may take them many years to pay off the loan. They are in this position through no fault of their own, undergoing a huge amount of stress and a great deal of anxiety because of the cladding and other issues in their blocks. As my hon. Friend quite rightly pointed out, many are people who would like to sell, but are unable to do so because they cannot get the right certification.

Secondly, in my experience, this issue goes beyond the very serious one of cladding into a range of other fire safety and building quality issues. There are what appear to be from the outside some beautiful blocks in Reading, next to the River Kennet. There is one with a beautiful white exterior and a modernist appearance. However, the sad reality for its residents is that the compartmentalisation of that building is not up to standard, and if there were a fire, it would be extremely dangerous for them. Therefore, we are seeing issues with compartmentalisation and proper quality of firewalls, whether it is in the original building or through subsequent changes that have not been carried out as they should have been carried out. There are also serious issues with fire spread within buildings and with fire safety doors. An elderly gentleman who lives in sheltered accommodation in a suburb came to me with very serious concerns about the fire door on the front of his property in a low-rise block. He replaced it only to then be told that, because of confusion around the quality of the replacement spec needed, he had to replace it with a further one and, as a pensioner, he was faced with an enormous bill of about £2,000 for a new door. These are the kinds of things we are talking about: cladding, doors, compartmentalisation, and a range of other serious issues. I ask the Minister to look again at the challenges that we face with the large number of lower-rise blocks—he obviously knows about

[*Matt Rodda*]

the dangerous fires in the two lower-rise blocks in Barking and Bolton—and at the issue of compartmentalisation and other subsequent and additional fire safety problems.

I thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for giving me an opportunity to speak in this debate at somewhat short notice. I do very much appreciate that and I wish him a happy St David's Day—I am afraid that I cannot say that in Welsh. I also ask the Minister if he might be able to reply to my points.

8.4 pm

The Minister for Housing (Christopher Pincher): May I, last if not least, wish you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and all other Members of the House a very happy St David's Day? I am grateful to the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan) for bringing this important topic to the House and to the hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) for the eloquent and passionate way in which he spoke on behalf of his constituents. I should like to thank other Members of the House who are not here this evening, such as my hon. Friends the Members for Kensington (Felicity Buchan) and for Ipswich (Tom Hunt), both of whom have spoken up, championing their constituents—something that all Members of Parliament do and should do on this issue.

Building safety is a matter of great significance to residents, not just in the Portsmouth South constituency but across the country. The Government's aim has always been to protect residents in high-rise blocks of flats without imposing burdensome costs on leaseholders. As Members are aware, last month the Government announced a clear five-point plan that will remove unsafe cladding, provide certainty for leaseholders, and ensure that industry takes the responsibility that it should for its past mistakes. Crucially, our plan also brings us one step closer to creating a world-class building safety regime. Integral to its success is finishing the job of removing unsafe cladding.

As I have a little bit of time, perhaps it would be helpful for me to set out some context and remind the House of where we have come from. Following the terrible tragedy of the Grenfell fire, the expert advice that the Government received identified aluminium composite cladding—the type found on the tower—as posing the most severe safety risk on high-rise residential buildings. That is why the Government committed £600 million to accelerate the removal and replacement of unsafe ACM cladding on high-rise residential buildings, and that work is now nearing completion. Almost 95% of all high-rise buildings identified at the beginning of last year with ACM cladding have now been remediated or have workers on site and works under way.

However, we recognised then and we recognise now that other forms of unsafe cladding, while less dangerous than ACM, should never have been allowed to be used in the construction of high-rise buildings and will need to be remediated too. As the hon. Member for Portsmouth South pointed out, although many building owners have acted to make these buildings safe—Barratt is one example of a developer that has done so; there are many others—some owners and developers have not. Put simply, too many building owners and managing agents in the private sector have been slow in getting remediation work started.

That is why we introduced the £1 billion building safety fund, to remediate high-rise residential buildings with unsafe non-ACM cladding as soon as possible and to shield leaseholders from the costs associated with those works. Additionally, as the House knows, last month, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced £3.5 billion in additional funding for the removal and replacement of unsafe cladding on high-rise residential buildings over 18 metres, or approximately six storeys, in England. We have always been clear, though, that public funding does not absolve the industry from taking responsibility for its own failures. In many cases, we have seen developers and building owners rightly correcting the defects they have created. Indeed, they have done so in more than half the high-rise private sector buildings with unsafe ACM cladding.

The position of the Government remains, as hon. Members would expect, that developers, investors and building owners who have the means to pay should do so. They should do the right thing and cover the costs of remediation of other unsafe cladding without passing on the costs to leaseholders. However, in many moving cases—the hon. Member for Portsmouth South mentioned a number—it is clear that building owners or their management agents have passed on significant remediation costs to leaseholders without any regard to the affordability of those measures.

The Secretary of State knows, as does Lord Greenhalgh, who leads on this area for the Government, that residents are extremely worried by the situations in which they find themselves. They are worried that the safety of their home is in jeopardy, and their life savings with it. Lord Greenhalgh has had many meetings with cladding campaigners. Indeed, he only recently spoke to the all-party parliamentary group on fire safety and leasehold and commonhold reform. He and the Government are absolutely clear that this distressing situation is completely unacceptable, and we are bringing it to a swift end by ensuring that leaseholders are no longer hit with such bills.

Under our risk-based approach, as identified by the report of Dame Judith Hackitt, the Government funding will focus on high-rise buildings, which is where the independent advisory panel has been clear that the highest risk lies. It is long-standing expert independent advice that height is a central factor in assessing risk. The National Fire Chiefs Council says so, the Building Research Establishment says so, and the independent panel says so. Taller buildings house more people, and when combined with combustible cladding, they are the least likely to be safely evacuated. This means that the overall risk from fire is greater than in lower-rise buildings—sometimes four times greater. That is why we are ensuring that these buildings are remediated, and we have provided grants to get this done quickly. It is right that the Government should prioritise action on high-rise buildings.

For buildings between 11 metres and 18 metres, the risk profile is different, as has been mentioned by the hon. Members for Portsmouth South and for Reading East. Those buildings will not always require the same level of remediation when risks are identified. Although those buildings do not carry the same inherent risk as buildings over 18 metres, we want to ensure that their residents are also given peace of mind and financial certainty. That is why we have said that leaseholders in

buildings between 11 and 18 metres will be able to access a generous long-term low-interest Government-backed finance scheme for the removal of dangerous cladding. That finance scheme will not affect their credit rating. It will not follow them round for life. If they sell their property, it will remain with the property. It will not be, as it were, an addition to their mortgage. It will effectively be a safety charge on the building.

As part of the financing scheme, leaseholder payments towards such remediation costs will be capped at a maximum of £50 a month for work that could potentially run into tens of thousands of pounds. We think that this is a fair solution that will provide the support that leaseholders expect, restore confidence in the risk and lending sectors and restore proportionate risk and value assessments so that value can be properly re-ascribed to these properties, while not unfairly burdening taxpayers, many of whom are not homeowners themselves. They are also the covid nurses doing a double shift in the hospital and the shelf stackers in the Tesco Metro in Reading or Portsmouth. We have to be conscious that it is taxpayers' money that we are disbursing, and we must be careful and sensible with it.

As the Secretary of State laid out in his statement to the House, the Government will ensure that the largest property owners also make a fair contribution to this remediation programme. A developer levy will be introduced and targeted at developers seeking permission to develop certain high-rise buildings in England. Industry must take collective responsibility for the historical building safety defects that it created, and our levy will help to ensure that it does. We will also introduce a new tax for British residential property development to make sure that the largest property developers make a fair contribution towards remediation.

Taken together, these measures will raise at least £2 billion over the next 10 years, fixing unsafe buildings and ensuring that those with the broadest shoulders bear the greatest burden. Our plan unequivocally makes homes safer and frees those who did the right thing, saving for years to get on to the property ladder to enjoy the homes in which they have invested so much. We are continuing to work at pace to make sure that these schemes protect leaseholders, prioritising affordability, transparency and empowerment while accelerating remediation.

The hon. Member for Reading East asked how we would ensure that those on low incomes are protected when they have to pay up to £50 a month. We are alive to the challenges that some people may face, and that is why, when we publish the mechanism for the financing scheme, we need to strike the right balance between the longevity and affordability of payments.

The hon. Member for Portsmouth South asked some specific questions about the building safety fund, so perhaps I could spend a moment or two advising the House on that. The House will know that we have allocated £1 billion during this financial year for the building safety fund, designed specifically to remediate high-rise buildings of unsafe non-ACM cladding. Almost 900 decisions have now been made and over 500 registered buildings are now proceeding with a full application. So far, nearly £160 million has been allocated for use, but the House will know—I have mentioned it myself at the Dispatch Box, as has my right hon Friend the Secretary of State—that, despite clear requirements of building

owners in relation to the building safety fund, all too many were unable to properly complete the application process so that the Government could properly assess the eligibility of those applications. Some 2,820 registrations to the fund were made and over 1,000 did not provide such supporting information, such as the height of the building that was applicable and the template lease agreements that apply. In some cases in Portsmouth, EWS1 forms were submitted suggesting that no remediation was necessary.

We have worked closely with the building owners and their agents to address this challenge. We have extended the timeframe for application to the end of June this year. I am confident that the money will be allocated—the works must begin by September this year—and that this fund, taken together with the £3.5 billion that we have also made available for the remediation of high-rise properties with unsafe cladding, will ensure that the work is done effectively and that those people can live safely and surely in their homes once again. I should say, however, that all registrants should continue to ensure that everything is done in the meantime to maximise the pace of remediation and continue to make progress with their applications to the fund, because we want this work to get on and complete as quickly as possible.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned the interim measures that we have put in place. I should remind him of one of the reasons why we have introduced the waking watch fund of £30 million to support those high-rise properties that have a waking watch, where costs are being passed on by owners to their leaseholders. We have introduced that fund to make sure that those in the greatest need are supported, but the best way to end waking watches is to get on and remediate those buildings. That is the message that we have impressed time and again on building owners and their agents. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman does exactly the same.

Ultimately, all these measures are designed to ensure that the remediation of unsafe buildings happens as soon as possible while protecting leaseholders from unfair, unaffordable costs. As I have said, we have made good progress on remediation. We have taken enforcement action with the joint inspection team, which we support and fund, helping local authorities and fire and rescue services around the country to undertake a number of important actions in which building owners have been fined or named and shamed. That work has contributed to the pressure that we have exerted, and we are now seeing the results.

We will continue to advance EWS1 applications to the building safety fund to the next stage so that we can finish the remaining remediation works, and we are doing that as quickly as we can. We have appointed specialist consultants further to increase the pace of remediation and get the job done. We have also spent £700,000 on the recruitment of 2,000 fire risk assessors. One hundred are being trained and put into the field every month to ensure that proper fire risk assessments can be made of buildings, to ensure that the proper costs to remediate them can be associated with them and work can begin.

Our plan means that building owners, developers and management agents take responsibility for fixing the problems that they created. The Fire Safety Bill that we introduced will strengthen enforcement action in cases in which they do not do so. We debated that Bill and its

[Christopher Pincher]

remaining provisions last week. The House will know that we could not accept the amendments tabled by my hon. Friends the Members for Southampton, Itchen (Royston Smith) and for Stevenage (Stephen McPartland). Their intent was good, decent and honourable, but the amendments did not provide sufficient regulatory underpinning to the Bill to protect the Government and the taxpayer from potential court action by landlords and freeholders, which would have stopped the progress of the Bill. I hope that the House will understand why the amendments, although well intentioned, were so defective that the Government could not accept them.

We will soon introduce the Building Safety Bill, which makes a once-in-a-generation change to the building safety regime. It will help to place even greater accountability on those responsible for these buildings so that no resident is asked to fix a problem that they did not cause

at a price that they cannot afford. We will fulfil our pledge to bring about the lasting change that we need so that confidence in our building safety regime is fully restored.

Many of the challenges that we have spoken about today—the hon. Members for Portsmouth South and for Reading East, and Conservative colleagues speak about them so forcefully—and beyond it have been allowed to build up over decades and by successive Governments. That is why we must tackle those failures once and for all, righting the wrongs of the past while delivering a fairer deal for taxpayers, who have had to foot so much of the bill, and for leaseholders, because they have a right to expect that and they deserve nothing less.

Question put and agreed to.

8.25 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 1 March 2021

TREASURY

Contingent Liability Notification and Disclosure of Asset Sale

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): I can confirm today that I have laid a Treasury Minute informing the House of certain liabilities that HM Treasury has taken on in authorising the sale of the remaining loan assets and share capital of Bradford & Bingley plc (B&B) and NRAM Limited.

This sale generates proceeds of £5.0 billion for the Exchequer, and will see NRAM, B&B and their subsidiary companies, including Mortgage Express (MX), together with their remaining mortgages and loan portfolios, sold to a consortium comprising Davidson Kempner Capital Management LP (Davidson Kempner) and Citibank (Citi). The majority of the financing for the transaction is being provided by funds managed by Pacific Investment Management Company LLC (PIMCO).

The transaction has been agreed and will complete in two stages. The first stage is the sale of the loans to Citi which is expected to complete within the next few weeks. The second stage is completion of the sale of the companies, and will see the sale of the legal entities of B&B and NRAM to Davidson Kempner. This stage is subject to the receipt of regulatory approvals from the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) and is expected to take place in the summer.

This sale constitutes a significant milestone in the work to achieve the Government's aim of returning the institutions brought into public ownership as a result of the 2007-2008 financial crisis to private ownership.

Rationale

It is Government policy that where a Government asset no longer serves a public purpose, or that purpose can be more efficiently realised with the asset in private ownership, the Government may choose to sell that asset, subject to value for money and market conditions being supportive.

The Government intervened in the financial sector to preserve financial stability. As this policy objective has now been met, those assets which came into public ownership should be returned to the private sector.

Format and Timing

The Government, UK Asset Resolution (UKAR) and UK Government Investments (UKGI) concluded that this sale achieves value for money having:

Conducted a rigorous analysis of whether market conditions were conducive for the sale of this portfolio;

considered whether the transaction had generated sufficient competitive tension to lead to a properly competitive process; and

conducted an assessment of the fair market value for the assets, including the legal entities of B&B and NRAM.

The sale made use of a structured bidding process, which has been shown to create competitive tension and has been used for previous Government asset sales.

Customer protections:

A key element in selecting the successful bidder was the treatment of customers. As in previous UKAR asset sales, bidders were required to agree to a robust package of customer protections before their bids were considered on other factors.

Customers do not need to take any action and can be assured that there will be no changes to the terms and conditions of any loans as a result of this transaction. They will continue to receive the same protections for the lifetime of their mortgage as they do today, and their right to re-mortgage will be unaffected.

The structure of this transaction also means that the legal title holder and administrator of customers' loans will not change at the point of sale. B&B, NRAM and MX will remain the legal title holders of the loans. Computershare will continue to service the loans.

Only the beneficial owner will change as a result of this sale, and the beneficial owner does not have an active role in the management of customers' loans.

B&B, NRAM, MX and Computershare are all regulated by the FCA. This means that customers will continue to enjoy the protections of the FCA's Treating Customers Fairly (TCF) principles and its Mortgages and Home Finance: Conduct of Business (MCOB) rules, as well as recourse to the Financial Ombudsman Service.

As the customer protections require that the administrator and legal title holder of these loans will always be an FCA-regulated entity, customers will continue to enjoy the protection of the FCA's rules if the legal title holder of their loans changes again at some point in the future.

Contingent Liability

On this occasion, due to the sensitivities surrounding the commercial negotiation of this transaction, it was not possible to notify Parliament of the particulars of the contingent liabilities in advance of the sale announcement.

The contingent liabilities HM Treasury is taking on include those which relate to certain warranties and indemnities that were given to the purchasers and which confirm regulatory, legislative and contractual compliance relating to the loans, assets and the share capital of the companies. The maximum contingent liability arising from the warranties and indemnities to the loan assets is approximately £4.9 billion.

The maximum contingent liability arising from the warranties and indemnities relating to the share capital of the companies is c.£290 million—100% of the purchase price of the shares. More information on these contingent liabilities has been set out in a Departmental Minute that has been laid before the House alongside this statement.

Fiscal Impacts

The impacts on the fiscal aggregates, in line with fiscal forecasting convention, are not discounted to present value. The net impacts of the sale on a selection of fiscal metrics are summarised as follows:

<i>Metric</i>	<i>Impact</i>
Sale proceeds	c. £5.0 billion
Hold valuation	
Net present value of the assets if held to maturity using Green Book assumptions	The price achieved is above the hold value range.

<i>Metric</i>	<i>Impact</i>
Public Sector Net Investment	Nil
Current budget	Decreased by: £350 million in 2024-25
Public Sector Net Borrowing	Increased by: £350 million in 2024-25
Public Sector Net Debt	Reduced by £5.0 billion— £4.4 billion in 2020-21 and £0.6 billion in 2021-22
Public Sector Net Liabilities	Increased by £100 million in 2020-21
Public Sector Net Financial Liabilities	Increased by £100 million in 2020-21

[HCWS813]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Destination Management Organisations: Independent Review

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston): On 1 March 2021 the Government launched an independent review of Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) in England. The review aims to examine and assess how such organisations are funded and structured, and how they perform their roles. The review will seek to establish whether there may be a more efficient and effective model for supporting English tourism at regional level, and if so what that model may be.

Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) are a common feature of local and regional tourism landscapes worldwide, and play an important role in the English tourism ecosystem.

There are an estimated 150 DMOs in England, although these vary substantially in terms of activity, size, geographical area covered, funding models, structure, impact and the degree to which they work with both the central Government and the British Tourist Authority (BTA, trading as VisitBritain and VisitEngland).

The Government recognise that the tourism sector has been among the worst-hit industries by covid-19 and that DMOs have been particularly hard hit, especially those reliant on commercial income. Many DMOs have been at risk of closure at a time when their business support role has become more important. Simultaneously, the pandemic has highlighted strong examples of standardisation, collaboration and more agile working among DMOs, and the Government are aware that DMOs will have an important role to play in supporting the English tourism sector recover in the medium and long term, in line with Government priorities around economic recovery and levelling up.

Against such a background, this independent review will seek to produce a detailed examination of the DMO landscape in England, focusing on:

- current funding models;
- organisational structures and
- performance levels—both in respect to before the covid-19 pandemic and since the start of 2020.

It will then try and establish whether the status quo is the most efficient, economically justifiable way of organising local and regional English tourism sectors. It will also look at whether these structures maximise opportunities

for supporting policy priorities on a local, regional and national scale, and, where relevant, internationally. These priorities include sector recovery, levelling up and economic growth, as well as various local and regional priorities that are likely to differ from area to area.

The review will be led by Nick de Bois, the current Chair of the VisitEngland Advisory Board. He will be acting in an independent capacity, supported by a DCMS Secretariat, and will aim to deliver a report with recommendations to the Government in summer 2021. It will then be for the Government to respond to the report in due course. The review marks an initial step in the Government's development of a tourism recovery plan.

Attachments can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2021-03-01/HCWS811/>.

[HCWS811]

EDUCATION

Contingencies Fund Advance

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson): The Department for Education has sought a repayable cash advance from the Contingencies Fund of £1,550,000,000.

The requirement has arisen due to increased costs relating to essential expenditure, including that relating to the covid-19 response. The funds associated with this estimate will not be released until the Supply and Appropriation Bill achieves Royal Assent in early March 2021.

Parliamentary approval for additional resources of £852,500,000 and capital of £697,500,000 has been sought in a supplementary estimate. Pending that approval, expenditure estimated at £1,550,000,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

The cash advance will be repaid upon receiving Royal Assent on the Supply and Appropriation Bill.

[HCWS812]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Protect Duty: Consultation

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): The first duty of the Government is to protect the public, and we are committed to improving the security of public venues, as outlined in our 2019 manifesto. The Government are proposing the Protect duty whereby certain venues and organisations would be required to consider terrorist threats and reasonable mitigations to these.

While there is much good work being done by many organisations to improve security, in the absence of a legislative requirement, there is no certainty that considerations of security are undertaken by those operating the wide variety of sites and places open to the public, or, where they are undertaken, what outcomes are achieved. This consultation considers how we could improve this position, through reasonable and not overly burdensome considerations of security and corresponding mitigating measures.

A consultation document was published on Friday 26 February, which seeks the views of those organisations and venues potentially within the scope of the protect duty, as to how we can work together to develop appropriate security measures to improve public security. It puts forward criteria and thresholds for inclusion, and considers how those responsible for public places could consider threat and appropriate proportionate mitigating action. It also considers what support would be required for venues and organisations to fulfil the requirements of the duty, and what oversight and sanctions would be appropriate were there to be non-compliance.

The consultation is for an extended 18-week period, in recognition that many of those potentially within scope continue to be impacted by covid-19. Extending the consultation period into the summer will allow those organisations more time to respond to proposals as businesses return to more usual operation. The Government will carefully consider next steps and their timing in light of consultation responses and the ongoing situation with regards to combating covid-19.

I would like to pay tribute to the families of those who have died in the recent attacks we have seen in the UK, many of whom have called for a legislative requirement to consider security to be implemented, in particular Figen Murray and the Martyn's Law campaign team.

A copy of the consultation document was placed in the Libraries of both Houses on Friday 26 February.

[HCWS809]

Controlling or Coercive Behaviour Offence: Government Review

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): Today, I am pleased to announce the publication of the Government's review into the offence of controlling or coercive behaviour (CCB) in an intimate or family relationship—as provided for in section 76 of the Serious Crime Act 2015. The review follows a commitment made in response to the 2018 consultation on domestic abuse.

The review considered the available data and research to understand how the CCB offence has been working since its introduction in 2015. It found that since the offence came into force in December 2015, police recorded CCB offences, as well as CCB prosecutions, have increased year on year. These increases demonstrate that the CCB offence is being used across the criminal justice system (CJS), indicating that the legislation has provided an improved legal framework to tackle CCB. However, the review recognises that there is still room for improvement, particularly with regard to raising awareness of what constitutes CCB among the public and across the CJS, and improving the ability of the CJS to record, evidence and prosecute these crimes. The review also considered views from a number of stakeholders who expressed concern that the cohabitation requirement within the offence is preventing some victims of this abuse from seeking justice, and poses challenges for police and prosecutors to evidence and charge abusive behaviours that are not captured by other legislation.

The review made a number of recommendations, including:

Building on the work of the Office for National Statistics in 2017, to develop robust estimates of the prevalence and characteristics of CCB;

In consultation with victims and support services, to develop suitable measures for victim outcomes;

Further work to assess the levels of awareness and understanding of the offence across the criminal justice system.

The review also recognised calls for legislative change, highlighting in particular the removal of the cohabitation requirement as well as some calls to extend the maximum sentence length and to remove the requirement to evidence a “serious effect” on the victim. As such, the review made the following research recommendations:

If legislative changes are implemented, the operation of the legislation should be monitored and reviewed closely to assess the impact and identify any unintended consequences;

If legislative changes are not made at this time, further research should be undertaken to ascertain the need for, and impact of, such changes to the legislation.

CCB is an insidious form of domestic abuse and this Government are committed to ensuring all victims are protected. We recognise that coercive or controlling behaviours may escalate following separation, and that members of a victim's extended family may be involved in control or coercion. We have heard the calls from experts on this matter, and I am very pleased to say that the Government will be removing the cohabitation requirement contained within the offence through an amendment to the Domestic Abuse Bill at Report stage in the House of Lords. This amendment will bring the controlling or coercive behaviour offence into line with the statutory definition of domestic abuse in clause 1 of the Bill and send a clear message to both victims and perpetrators that controlling or coercive behaviours, irrespective of living status, are a form of domestic abuse.

We recognise that the review also raised questions around the need for other legislative change, including reference to increasing the maximum penalty for the CCB offence in line with the current maximum penalty for stalking, and removing the evidence requirement to prove that the behaviour had a serious effect on the victim. Given the review acknowledged that evidence for these changes is currently limited, we will continue to monitor the offence and keep these other proposals for legislative change under review.

This summer we will be publishing a domestic abuse strategy which will build on work to date to help transform the response to domestic abuse, tackling perpetrators and placing the needs of victims at the heart of our response. We will consider the wider policy and data recommendations made in the review throughout the development and implementation of this strategy, and will of course continue to engage with domestic abuse organisations throughout this process. We will also update the statutory guidance for the controlling or coercive behaviour offence to reflect both the findings of the review and change to the legislation.

Domestic abuse is an abhorrent crime and this Government are committed to doing all that we can support victims and tackle offenders. I am delighted that, in removing the co-habitation requirement within the CCB offence, we are able to take another step in ensuring every victim has access to the protection that they need.

A copy of the review will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS810]

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