

**Tuesday  
2 March 2021**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES**

**(HANSARD)**

**Tuesday 2 March 2021**

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# House of Commons

Tuesday 2 March 2021

*The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock*

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

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

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

## Oral Answers to Questions

### FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

#### Iran's Regional Activities: Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps

**Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in Iran's regional activities; and if he will make a statement. [912749]

**The Minister for the Middle East and North Africa (James Cleverly)**: We have long condemned Iran's regional destabilising activity, including its political, financial and military support to militant and proscribed groups including Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria, militias in Iraq and the Houthis in Yemen. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps is, in its entirety, subject to the UK's autonomous sanctions. On 18 February, the Foreign Secretary, alongside his E3 and US counterparts, committed in a statement to working with regional parties to address their security concerns. We continue to support the security of our partners working to end the conflict in Yemen, and strengthen institutions in Iraq and Lebanon.

**Michael Fabricant** [V]: As my hon. Friend the Minister will know, it is not just activity in the middle east that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps is responsible for; it is not just with Hezbollah. There have been incidents in France and other parts of Europe, and it has caused the United States to ban the Revolutionary Guard and make it a terror organisation. When will the United Kingdom do the same and designate it as a terrorist organisation?

**James Cleverly**: We keep the list of proscribed organisations under review. As my hon. Friend knows, we do not routinely comment on whether organisations or individuals are under consideration for proscription. As I say, the IRGC is, in its entirety, subject to our autonomous sanctions regime. The UK, along with our European partners, wholeheartedly condemned the bomb plots in 2018 and 2019, including the one in Paris to which my hon. Friend referred.

### Cameroon: English-speaking Minority

**Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): What the Government's policy is on the current status of the English-speaking minority in Cameroon. [912750]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (James Duddridge)**: The situation in Cameroon's anglophone region remains deeply concerning. We continue to call for an end to all violence and the restart of an inclusive dialogue that addresses the root cause of the crisis. When I spoke to Prime Minister Ngute in December, I reiterated the UK's commitment to supporting a peaceful resolution to this issue.

**Sir Edward Leigh**: The situation in southern Cameroon is indeed deeply concerning. What is happening there to the anglophone minority of some 5 million people is terrible. There are numerous human rights abuses. The francophone president—a corrupt dictator—has been in power since 1982, and is refusing to devolve any power at all to the English-speaking minority. Will the Government now act? Will the Foreign Secretary, at the highest level, take it up with our French allies, as they have enormous influence in francophone Africa? Will the Minister for Africa do the equivalent of old gunboat diplomacy in our soft-power age, and himself visit southern Cameroon to take up this issue, and try to help our English-speaking friends who we betrayed back in 1962?

**James Duddridge**: I certainly will visit Cameroon at the earliest possible opportunity. I can reassure my right hon. Friend that we have worked very closely with our French and American partners, alongside other partners. We also do an awful lot of work through this House and through the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) on bringing peace to that region and sharing experiences. I thank him for his interest and certainly will commit to further activity and a visit in due course.

### Sri Lanka

**Sam Tarry** (Ilford South) (Lab): What (a) diplomatic and (b) development work his Department is undertaking in Sri Lanka. [912751]

**Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): What steps he is taking to propose a new UN resolution to hold the Sri Lankan Government to account on their responsibilities for justice and reconciliation processes following that country's civil war. [912774]

**Fleur Anderson** (Putney) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the human rights situation in Sri Lanka. [912775]

**The Minister for Asia (Nigel Adams)**: The Minister for South Asia, Lord Ahmad, set out our serious concerns about human rights in Sri Lanka in a statement at the UN Human Rights Council on 25 February. On 22 February, the Foreign Secretary confirmed that the UK would lead a new resolution on post-conflict reconciliation, accountability and human rights. We continue to engage with Sri Lanka on these issues and

on climate change, trade and the covid-19 response. UK-funded programmes in Sri Lanka support peacebuilding, resettlement, police reform and demining.

**Sam Tarry:** For decades, the UK has provided extensive military and police support to the Sri Lankan police and military, and this support has continued despite deeply troubling reports of the widespread use of torture by the Sri Lankan police, including the use of the death penalty for drugs charges. Will the Minister please explain why the UK has spent more than £7 million through its conflict, stability and security fund to assist the Sri Lankan police and military? More importantly, will he commit to publishing the full overseas security and justice assistance assessments for activities under this programme to reassure the House that the UK is not contributing to serious human rights violations?

**Nigel Adams:** I know the hon. Member takes a very keen interest in Sri Lanka. Our engagement with the military in Sri Lanka is designed to support the development of a modern, effective and human rights-compliant military. Engagement with the police is focused on community policing, increasing women's representation, and improving responses to sexual and gender-based violence. Our engagement is subject to ongoing overseas security and justice assessments, as he says, to ensure that it supports UK values and is consistent with human rights obligations.

**Mr Dhesi:** Many of my Slough constituents, especially those worshipping at Masjid Al-Jannah, were extremely distressed by the alarming reports of forced cremations of Sri Lankan coronavirus victims, including Muslims and Christians, for whom burial rights and traditions are sacred. As the country hopefully progresses with truth, justice and reconciliation after its devastating civil war, what representations has the Minister made to his Sri Lankan counterpart on respect for and the protection of everyone's religious beliefs and freedoms?

**Nigel Adams:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise this matter, which I know is of great concern to his constituents and to many other hon. Members' constituents. My colleague, Lord Ahmad, who is the Minister responsible for Sri Lanka, has raised the important issue of human rights, accountability and reconciliation with his counterpart, the Sri Lankan Foreign Minister, and the UN high commissioner, but he also has deep concerns about the decision to mandate cremations for those deceased due to covid. The United Kingdom has shared guidance on how burials can happen within World Health Organisation guidelines to the Sri Lankan authorities.

**Fleur Anderson [V]:** With reference to the expiry of UN Human Rights Council resolution 40/1 this month, what success have the Government had in their role as leader of the core group on Sri Lanka at the UNHCR in drafting a new UN Human Rights Council resolution that secures international support and reflects the eight areas of focus set out by the UNHCR's recent report?

**Nigel Adams:** We are very concerned by the recent UN report on human rights and accountability in Sri Lanka. As I have said previously, we have made our concerns about the human rights situation clear. The

Foreign Secretary has confirmed that the United Kingdom would lead a new resolution on post-conflict reconciliation, accountability and human rights.

### Covid-19 Vaccines

**Theo Clarke (Stafford) (Con):** What diplomatic steps the Government are taking to support the development of covid-19 vaccines (a) in the UK and (b) throughout the world. [912752]

**The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs and First Secretary of State (Dominic Raab):** The UK will use its G7 presidency this year to advance equitable access to safe and effective vaccines through widespread international co-operation.

**Theo Clarke [V]:** Having visited the Kingston vaccination centre recently, I have seen first-hand the fantastic work that our healthcare workers are doing to vaccinate my Stafford constituents, but in order to fully defeat covid-19 we must vaccinate people around the world. During my virtual visit to Kenya last week, there was much excitement about the upcoming delivery of some covid-19 vaccines. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is essential that we not only allow countries to access our surplus capacity via COVAX but donate vaccines to the poorest countries in the world?

**Dominic Raab:** I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the great work she is doing locally but also for raising the issue of international access to the vaccine. She will know that the UK has contributed £548 million to COVAX AMC, which is the international mechanism that will secure over 1 billion doses. In relation to her virtual Kenya visit, the roll-out of the first deliveries under COVAX has now begun in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, and by the end of June, in 92 of these poorer countries, we want to see all the vulnerable receiving their vaccines. That is global Britain as a force for good.

**Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op):** I welcome the news that the Foreign Secretary has just outlined about the COVAX deliveries in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire; that is excellent. Tragically, we have seen 50,000 deaths in South Africa alone from covid-19, but we have also seen 409,000 deaths from malaria and 700,000 deaths from AIDS-related causes. An estimated 1.8 million could die from tuberculosis in 2020, and there are Ebola outbreaks in Africa at the moment. Vaccines, whether for covid or other diseases, only work when there are the strong public health systems to deliver them, with the nurses, doctors and cold chain and diagnostic capacity. We have a moral duty to do our fair share, and it is in our global common interest. Will the Foreign Secretary be maintaining our overall bilateral and multilateral health spending, or will it be cut?

**Dominic Raab:** The hon. Gentleman is right to pay tribute to the work that the UK has done internationally not just on COVAX and the vaccine for this pandemic but on TB, malaria, polio and a whole range of other areas. We have had to make the difficult decision on the 0.7%, and the allocations will be published in due course, but we have been very clear that public health is the No.1 priority to be safeguarded across the piece.

### China: Human Rights

**Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): What progress he has made on identifying and applying sanctions against senior Chinese Government officials responsible for human rights violations against (a) the Uyghur people and (b) Hong Kong citizens. [912753]

**The Minister for Asia (Nigel Adams):** The Foreign Secretary announced targeted measures on 12 January to help ensure that no British organisations are complicit in the gross human rights violations occurring in Xinjiang. The United Kingdom continues to lead international action, including at the UN, to hold China to account. The Foreign Secretary made a robust intervention at the Human Rights Council on 22 February, calling out the systematic violation of the rights of people in Hong Kong and pressing China for unfettered access to Xinjiang for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

**Afzal Khan** [V]: Ahead of International Women's Day, I would like to take this opportunity to highlight the recent report by the BBC, which highlighted the extensive use of sexual violence in Xinjiang. I am sure the Minister will agree that the report was incredibly troubling and details what can only be described as torture and abuse of human rights and dignity. Can he explain why it is taking the Government so long to sanction Chinese officials? In the light of recent Magnitsky sanctions in the case of Myanmar, can he explain why they have yet to be used in the case of Xinjiang?

**Nigel Adams:** The hon. Gentleman takes a keen interest in this subject, and I appreciate all the work he does on it. We are carefully considering further designations under our human rights sanctions regime, but he will appreciate that it is not appropriate to speculate on who may be designated in the future, as to do so could reduce the impact of such sanctions.

**Mr Speaker:** I have agreed with the Minister to separate Questions 8 and 9, so we now have a substantive question from Jamie Stone.

### Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games: Team GB Boycott

**Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): If he will make an assessment with Cabinet colleagues on the potential merits of Team GB boycotting the 2022 winter Olympic and Paralympic games in Beijing. [912800]

**The Minister for Asia (Nigel Adams):** The hon. Member will no doubt have heard the Prime Minister highlight that we are not normally in favour of sporting boycotts. Along with that, participation of the national team at the winter Olympics is a matter for the British Olympic Association, which is required to operate independently of the Government under International Olympic Committee regulations.

**Jamie Stone** [V]: I am indeed aware of what the Prime Minister has said. Nevertheless, allies such as the United States and Canada have referred to what is going on in Xinjiang province as genocide. First, does the Minister agree that we should get international condemnation of these ghastly goings on in China? Secondly, in view of what the Prime Minister said, does the Minister agree

that we should support those athletes who choose individually to boycott the winter Olympic and Paralympic games, as a demonstration of their opposition to this genocide?

**Nigel Adams:** We are leading international action, including at the UN, to hold China to account. We have led from the front. We have an increasing cohort of countries supporting our statements on the happenings in Xinjiang. This is a matter for the British Olympic Association and the individual sportsmen. The British Olympic Association is required to operate independently of Government, and rightly so, under the regulations set down by the International Olympic Committee. This is a matter for the Olympic organisations and individual sportsmen.

**Alyn Smith** (Stirling) (SNP) [V]: The malfeasance of the Chinese Government in Xinjiang, Tibet and Hong Kong is well documented, and my party supports the offer that has been made to the 5 million Hong Kong citizens of a route to citizenship. However, I would be grateful for an assurance from the Minister that proper preparations and proper funding for the integration of Hongkongers coming to the UK are actually in place, because I am not convinced they are. We cannot let this scheme just be a first-class lifeboat for the rich of Hong Kong; it does need to be properly run through for everybody. Can he commit to a statement to the House in due course explaining how the scheme is being worked through with the Home Office and the proper funding being allocated to make sure this is open to all Hongkongers?

**Nigel Adams:** That is a very sensible question from the hon. Gentleman. It is absolutely the case that we need to ensure that those British national overseas passport holders who arrive in the UK are treated and greeted well. We welcome the many applications that we have had thus far. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has met the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to discuss exactly the issue the hon. Gentleman raises. It is important that people are given the right support when they arrive in the United Kingdom, and I am sure that further information on such schemes and what has been organised for these people coming from Hong Kong will be announced very shortly.

### Kurdistan

**Robert Halfon** (Harlow) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the political situation in the Kurdistan region. [912754]

**The Minister for the Middle East and North Africa (James Cleverly):** I visited Iraq and the Kurdistan region of Iraq in December last year, meeting Iraq's Prime Minister al-Kadhimi and the Prime Minister of the Kurdistan region of Iraq, Prime Minister Barzani. Recent attacks on coalition forces and civilians in Irbil are unacceptable. The UK stands fully behind Iraq and the Kurdistan region of Iraq. We welcome the Iraqi investigation to hold the perpetrators to account, and the UK encourages co-operation between Baghdad and Irbil to agree a sustainable budget, something I discussed with both the Iraqi Finance Minister and Prime Minister Barzani on that visit in December.

**Mr Speaker:** Let us go to Robert Halfon. [*Interruption.*] Oh, right—let us move on.

### Official Development Assistance Budget

**Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the potential effect of reductions in the official development assistance budget on poverty in the global south. [912755]

**Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): What the (a) timetable and (b) scope is of his proposed changes to official development assistance spending. [912770]

**Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the potential effect of reductions in the official development assistance budget on poverty in the global south. [912771]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (James Duddridge):** The Government remain firmly committed to helping the world's poorest people. Our aid budget will continue to serve the primary aim of reducing poverty in developing countries, including in the global south.

**Gerald Jones** [V]: The Government have made the appalling decision to slash life-saving support for the world's poorest and most vulnerable people in the middle of a pandemic, and an equally appalling announcement yesterday about Yemen highlighted a blatant disregard to fulfilling their moral duty. Will the Minister and the Foreign Secretary press the Chancellor to use this week's Budget to rebuild Britain's proud position as a country that supports those in need by reversing his decision to make the UK the only G7 nation to cut its aid budget?

**James Duddridge:** I am sorry the hon. Gentleman thinks that £10 billion is a small sum of money. He mentions Yemen; we should be proud that, since the start of that conflict, we have contributed £1 billion, and at the pledging conference yesterday, a further £87 million. That is activity from this Government, and we are proud of that activity.

**Martyn Day** [V]: It is reported that cuts announced to international aid spending will not come in until after the G7 summit. This merely delays rather than avoids humiliation on the world stage, while the absence of a timetable for when the cuts will take place leaves charities trying to plan ahead in limbo. Does the Minister agree that this unsustainable position will be detrimental to project outcomes, and would it not be preferable to reverse this shameful decision now?

**James Duddridge:** I just do not recognise the timescale that the hon. Member speaks of. We work with partners on an ongoing basis on the delivery of programmes, and we will continue to do so. That is what I do on a daily basis, among other Ministers.

**Jeff Smith** [V]: Britain holds the pen on Yemen, but as the senior country is it not our duty to lead by example, and is not cutting aid by 60% at a time of

acute humanitarian crisis a terrible example? The UN Secretary-General said that reducing aid was a "death sentence". Is he wrong?

**James Duddridge:** Another person who does not think that £1 billion is a lot of money—[*Interruption.*] Well, £87 million is a lot of money. We are doing exactly what the hon. Gentleman is saying and we are standing up. This is the fifth largest pledge to Yemen, and he should be proud of that, not attacking it.

**Chris Law** (Dundee West) (SNP) [V]: I am hearing a lot of bluff and bluster. This Government are pressing ahead with the deepest and most devastating cuts to the aid budget at the worst possible time, and in doing so they are renegeing on the UK's commitment to spend 0.7% of GNI on aid, which is enshrined in law. When I asked the Foreign Secretary about that, he said:

"We want to respect that legislation, and we will."

With press reports speculating that cuts will take place from April, and that the legislation will not be amended until July, will the Foreign Secretary refuse to implement those cuts before the legislation is passed? Will he resign if he breaks the law—yes or no?

**James Duddridge:** As the Foreign Secretary said earlier, we will look carefully at what is required by law, but the law envisages that 0.7% target potentially not being met in any given year, in view of the specific fiscal and economic circumstances. We will abide by that law. Furthermore, the legislation allows us to report to Parliament on what we are doing, and we will stick to that.

**Sarah Champion** (Rotherham) (Lab) [V]: I was ashamed yesterday when this Government more than halved their contribution to the humanitarian support in Yemen—the worst humanitarian disaster on the planet. I hope that is not the global Britain we want. What consultation has the Minister had with non-governmental organisations, recipients, and partners in the global south, to minimise the impact of changes to the UK aid budget? When will the Government publish their forthcoming country allocations for official development assistance spending?

**James Duddridge:** The process the hon. Lady mentions regarding the decisions on publication has not yet been met. Our focus has been on looking at country plans and the programmes centrally, and on doing that through countries. By extension, part of that will be looking through delivery partners, including the NGOs that play an excellent role. We are engaging with them as early as possible, including through embassies to where a lot of this relationship is devolved. That is essential, and we remain committed to doing that.

### Girls' Education: Covid-19

**Jane Hunt** (Loughborough) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of the covid-19 pandemic on the Government's policy to ensure that girls receive 12 years of quality education. [912756]

**Karen Bradley** (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help ensure that every girl receives 12 years of quality education. [912759]

**Caroline Nokes** (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help ensure that every girl receives 12 years of quality education. [912778]

**The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs and First Secretary of State (Dominic Raab)**: Over the past five years, UK aid has helped 8 million girls get a decent education, and, as the House knows, our global ambition is to ensure that 40 million girls have 12 years of quality education by 2026.

**Jane Hunt** [V]: The theme for this year's International Women's Day is "Choose to Challenge", which serves as a reminder to us all to challenge and call out gender bias and inequality where we see them. According to UNICEF, only 66% of countries have achieved gender parity in primary education, falling to only 25% by upper secondary education. Will the Secretary of State reassure me that he will not only continue working with his international counterparts to ensure that girls do not fall further behind as a result of the pandemic, but that he will continue his vital work to break down the very real barriers to girls' education?

**Dominic Raab**: I thank my hon. Friend, and reassure her that not only do we have a target of 40 million girls getting 12 years of education, but we want 20 million girls to become literate by the age of 10. With Kenya, we will be co-hosting a major summit in July this year to progress those goals. In January I was in Addis Ababa and had the chance to visit the Yeka Misrak Chora School, which showed me at first hand the incredible difference our aid budget makes.

**Karen Bradley** [V]: I welcome what the Foreign Secretary has said regarding the UK's commitment to ensuring an education for girls. There is no doubt that the UK has world leadership on this issue, as we do on modern slavery and preventing gender-based violence, and of course it was the UK that worked to help stop Ebola becoming a global pandemic. Will the Foreign Secretary confirm his commitment not just to this area, but to maintaining overseas development spending on these very important issues?

**Dominic Raab**: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right about the importance of this issue. As we go through the difficult financial situation that we face, we have been very clear that girls' education is a top priority to safeguard. On top of the money that we are putting in and the convening power that we are exercising with the joint summit we are hosting with Kenya, the Prime Minister has appointed my hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant) as the special envoy on girls' education.

**Caroline Nokes** [V]: I applaud the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister for making educating girls a foreign policy priority. As host of the G7, we have a critical opportunity to encourage others to do the same. Can my right hon. Friend tell me how much ODA spending he will commit to girls' education this year to make sure that our manifesto commitment to ensuring that every girl gets 12 years of quality education has the funding that it needs?

**Dominic Raab**: I reassure my right hon. Friend, first of all, that the money is being safeguarded; of course, it is published in the normal way, through the formal channels, in the autumn. Through the appointment of the Prime Minister's special envoy, the convening power that I have described and, as she quite rightly says, our presidency of the G7, we are making sure that this is at the very top of the international agenda.

**Preet Kaur Gill** (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: The British people have a proud history of stepping up and supporting those in need, but the actions of this Government yesterday betrayed hundreds of thousands of Yemeni children, as the Foreign Secretary chose to leave them to starve. In November, he told the House that humanitarian crises were one of his priorities, yet he has cut funding to the largest humanitarian crisis in the world by 60%. Clearly, the Foreign Secretary's commitments are worthless. Does he agree that his Government's actions have shown our allies and our detractors that his word cannot be trusted?

**Dominic Raab**: I thank the hon. Lady, although the obvious point to make is that the last Labour Government never hit 0.7% and only hit 0.5% twice. In relation to Yemen, over the last five years, including for 2021, we have been between the third and the fifth highest donors. We will keep up that effort. We have provided more than £1 billion of funding to the humanitarian crisis in Yemen since the conflict began, and of course we fully support the efforts of Martin Griffiths, the UN special envoy, to find peace there.

**Preet Kaur Gill**: The Foreign Secretary is leading a hasty retreat from the world stage while others are stepping forward. We are the only G7 nation to cut aid. The United States has added billions to its development budget, and France has committed to increasing its support for the world's poorest by reaching 0.7% by 2025. The Government cannot keep pretending that they can make cuts without risking millions of lives, so will the Foreign Secretary immediately publish all the details of the cuts made in 2020 and those projected for 2021? Will he also explain to the House what his priorities are? Clearly, preventing hundreds of thousands of Yemenis from going hungry and starving to death is not one of them.

**Dominic Raab**: Of course, the allocations are published formally in the normal way, as I have just described, in the autumn. In fact, the new UK aid pledge of £87 million, which the hon. Lady so blithely dismisses, will feed an additional 240,000 of the most vulnerable Yemenis every month, support 400 health clinics and provide clean water for 1.6 million people. We are doing our bit. Of course these are very difficult financial circumstances. We remain, as we have over the last five years, between the third and the fifth highest donor into Yemen.

**Tom Tugendhat** (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con) [V]: I very much welcome the Foreign Secretary's commitment to women's and girls' education. Does he agree, however, that female genital mutilation, which sadly affects so many girls across the world, is one of the great hindrances to the education of girls in many parts of the world, including, sadly, Nigeria? I am sure he joins me in welcoming the release of the girls from Zamfara state

only the other day, but will he raise with the Nigerian Government, when he next has the opportunity to do so, the likelihood that some 14 million will go through female genital mutilation between now and 2030? This is a crime, it is a sin, and it is against all justice.

**Dominic Raab:** I thank my hon. Friend, the Chairman of the Select Committee. I join him in welcoming the release of the young girls who were kidnapped, which I am sure came as a huge relief to the whole House. He raises, in a passionate way, the issue of FGM. We have been leaders in calling that out, and also in trying to work with Governments around the world, in particular in Africa, to try to bring an end to this appalling practice. We will continue to do so, in Nigeria and elsewhere.

#### East Jerusalem: Forced Evictions and Disposessions

**Julie Elliott** (Sunderland Central) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with his Israeli counterpart on forced evictions and disposessions in East Jerusalem. [912757]

**The Minister for the Middle East and North Africa (James Cleverly):** The United Kingdom provides legal aid to vulnerable Palestinian communities at threat of demolition. In 96% of cases, those receiving UK-funded legal support have remained in their homes. The UK ambassador joined ambassadors of European states to urge the Government of Israel to cease demolitions. He attended a meeting with Israeli authorities on 25 February. At the United Nations Security Council on 26 February, the UK permanent representative called on Israel to end demolitions of Palestinian homes and allow the delivery of emergency humanitarian aid.

**Julie Elliott** [V]: I, like many colleagues, have heard repeated stories from Palestinians who are facing forced eviction, dispossession and demolition of their homes in areas such as Sheikh Jarrah, Silwan and Issawiya in occupied East Jerusalem. I and many other people see that as a deliberate attempt to re-engineer the demographic make-up of occupied East Jerusalem. What more can the Government do, rather than just urge the Israeli Government to stop it? What more can the British Government do to bring an end to this unacceptable situation?

**James Cleverly:** The United Kingdom has a close and productive working relationship with Israel. When we speak, the Israelis absolutely do listen. The hon. Lady dismisses our urgings, but I remind her that the UK's voice has had an influence on decisions made by the Government of Israel. We will continue to engage, as my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary did very recently with his counterpart Foreign Minister Ashkenazi and the Israeli ambassador to the Court of St James's only last month.

#### Israel and the Palestinians: Support for Peace

**Sarah Atherton** (Wrexham) (Con): What diplomatic steps he is taking to support peace between Israel and the Palestinians. [912758]

**Jonathan Gullis** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): What diplomatic steps he is taking to support peace between Israel and the Palestinians. [912769]

**The Minister for the Middle East and North Africa (James Cleverly):** The UK is actively encouraging both parties back to dialogue. As I just mentioned, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary met his opposite number on 10 February. I spoke to the Palestinian head of mission here in the UK on 2 February. The UK has been working with both the Government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority, alongside the United States and international key partners, to progress specific areas of co-operation, including water and gas provision, energy infrastructure and trade facilitation. We are also seeking to re-establish formal Israeli-Palestinian mechanisms, such as the joint economic committee and its relevant sub-committees.

**Sarah Atherton:** The International Criminal Court's controversial determination on jurisdiction relating to Israel and the Palestinians not only undermines the middle east peace process but heightens the exposure of our armed forces to vexatious claims by setting a precedent that non-state actors can initiate proceedings. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that the UK is at the forefront of reforms of the ICC?

**James Cleverly:** The UK respects the ICC's independence, but we are working with other countries to bring about positive change within the court. The UK was instrumental in the establishment of the independent expert review, which reported in September, together with other state parties. Additionally, the UK is driving forward reforms to governance, prosecutorial excellence, and a more rigorous approach to budget control and value for money.

**Jonathan Gullis:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I do hope Madam Deputy Speaker will be pleased that I have a jacket accompanying my jumper today.

It has been almost a year since my right hon. Friend expressed his hopes that the European Union would produce a balanced and independent report into the Palestinian Authority's school curriculum, which contains shocking material inciting violence against Israel and Jews. What steps will the Government take if the long-awaited report, due for publication this month, falls short of the required standard?

**James Cleverly:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising this point and for the consistent approach that he has taken to this issue. We remain concerned about the allegations in Palestinian Authority textbooks and have lobbied European partners to bring forward their report in a timely manner. I have also discussed the issue directly with the Palestinian Authority's representative in the UK, and we have regular discussions with the EU to encourage it to get this report into the public domain. In the interim, the UK will continue to raise our concerns bilaterally with the Palestinian Authority at the very highest levels.

#### Climate Change: International Co-operation

**Jack Brereton** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): What progress his Department has made through international co-operation on tackling climate change. [912760]

**Paul Howell** (Sedgefield) (Con): What progress his Department has made through international co-operation on tackling climate change. [912762]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (James Duddridge):** In December, the UK co-hosted the Climate Ambition summit, where 75 world leaders set out more ambitious climate commitments. Last week, the Prime Minister chaired the UN Security Council debate on this issue. In addition, the Foreign Secretary has discussed climate in his meetings with the US, Brazil and India, among other counterparts.

**Jack Brereton** [V]: I thank my hon. Friend for his response. Does he agree that our hosting of the UN conference on climate change, to be held in Scotland this year, reinforces the UK's claim to be leading the world in tackling climate change?

**James Duddridge:** I welcome that question—it appears, Mr Speaker, that we are welcoming the whole family into the House. My hon. Friend is absolutely right: the UK has a proud record of climate leadership. In 2019, we were the first major economy to legislate for net zero by 2050. We are also doubling our international climate finance facility to £11.6 billion in the 2021 to 2025 period and, this year, we are encouraging every country to make ambitious new pledges to fulfil the 2015 Paris agreement.

**Paul Howell** [V]: As a member of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, I am very interested in the international engagement in COP26. Will the Minister outline exactly what actions the Department is taking to help the President of COP26 to maximise the potential for a successful event in Glasgow?

**James Duddridge:** I thank my hon. Friend for that question. In every call that we make as Ministers, we raise this issue. My right hon. Friend the COP26 President designate has the full support of the diplomatic network. In fact, just last month, he met Ethiopian, Gabonese, Egyptian, Nigerian, Indian and Nepalese partners, and those are the only ones I know about. Later this month, we will convene international partners to help to identify practical solutions to the challenge that every country must face, particularly to help the most vulnerable on this really important issue of climate change.

#### **Occupied Palestinian Territories: Humanitarian Situation**

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What recent assessment the Government have made of the humanitarian situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. [912761]

**Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith) (Lab): If he will maintain the level of the UK's funding contribution to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency. [912765]

**Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): What recent assessment the Government have made of the humanitarian situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. [912777]

**The Minister for the Middle East and North Africa (James Cleverly):** The UK remains concerned about the fragile humanitarian situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, particularly in Gaza. The UK is providing £4.5 million in humanitarian assistance to the OPTs, including £1 million to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency's emergency appeal and £2.5 million to the World Food Programme for cash assistance. The UK supports UNRWA as a vital humanitarian force in the region and the FCDO is running a prioritisation exercise across all its programmes to ensure that every pound goes as far as possible.

**Alan Brown** [V]: The Minister rightly highlights forced evictions and demolitions breaking international law, but none the less, Israel continues with its evictions in Sheikh Jarrah and Batan al-Hawa. The proposed construction of 1,200 houses at Givat HaMatos is out to tender at the moment. Action is needed, not just words, so when will the UK Government implement trade bans on goods from illegal settlements?

**James Cleverly:** The UK's position on this issue is long standing and clear. We oppose the points that the hon. Gentleman has put forward. We raise the issue of demolitions regularly with our Israeli counterparts, and we will continue to do so at every opportunity.

**Andy Slaughter** [V]: [*Inaudible.*]—aid budget implies the loss of a third in UNRWA funding, and there are rumours that the Government could be planning to cut twice that. UNRWA is responsible for almost 6 million Palestinian refugees, including the education of 500,000 children, the healthcare of 3 million and emergency food aid for over 1 million. Because of the occupation, Palestinians in Gaza, the west bank and surrounding countries rely on UNRWA for basic public services, so will the Minister give a clear and courageous answer and guarantee at least the current level of funding?

**James Cleverly:** The UK Government regard UNRWA as an important partner in support of the people in the OPTs and surrounding areas. We are going through a prioritisation exercise at the moment, the outcome of which will be published in due course.

**Joanna Cherry** [V]: As schools around the world deal with the challenges of the covid pandemic, Palestinian schoolchildren face a further threat. According to the United Nations, 53 Palestinian schools in the occupied west bank are subject to Israeli Government demolition orders. Does the Minister agree that demolishing any school is wrong and that any such action should have consequences?

**James Cleverly:** The UK regularly raises the issue of demolitions and our position on this is clear. We will continue to do so, and we will continue to highlight the importance of education, which remains one of the Government's priorities.

**Wayne David** (Caerphilly) (Lab) [V]: The Israeli covid-19 vaccination programme is the best in the world. However, the Minister has indicated that Israel has a legal responsibility to ensure the health and wellbeing of Palestinians on the west bank. Will he therefore join me in urging the Israeli Government to work with the Palestinian Authority to ensure that Palestinians are vaccinated, as well as Israelis?

**James Cleverly:** The UK is justifiably proud of the work it is doing on the international stage with regard to vaccinations, including through Gavi and the COVAX scheme. We are pleased to see the Government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority co-ordinating their work with regard to vaccinations, and we look forward to that vaccination programme rolling out not just across Israel but to the people who are living in the OPTs.

### Topical Questions

[912809] **Robert Largan** (High Peak) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs and First Secretary of State (Dominic Raab):** Since the last oral questions, I have visited east Africa. I have also visited Cyprus, where I met President Anastasiades and the Turkish Cypriot leader in support of the peace initiative and the UN talks. On 18 February, I met our E3 partners in Paris and also the new Secretary of State, Tony Blinken, to co-ordinate our approach to Iran. Finally, I am sure the whole House will be pleased to hear that the international community has elected not just the first British female judge in the International Criminal Court but the first British chief prosecutor.

**Robert Largan** [V]: The Prime Minister has rightly condemned the UN's Human Rights Council for its disproportionate focus on Israel, which he said was "damaging to the cause of peace".

As the UN Human Rights Council meets over the coming weeks, will the Government commit to voting against one-sided resolutions singling out Israel, including those outside permanent agenda item 7, in order to send a clear message that such blatant anti-Israel bias will not be tolerated?

**Dominic Raab:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have stood up for Israel when it has faced bias and, frankly, politicised attacks in the UN and other forums. We will continue to press for the abolition of item 7, because it is the only country-specific standalone agenda item and it focuses on Israel, and that cannot be right.

**Lisa Nandy** (Wigan) (Lab): The US intelligence report released last Friday makes a clear and compelling case that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman approved the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. Last year, the Foreign Secretary said of those with "blood on their hands":

*"You cannot set foot in this country and we will seize your blood-drenched ill-gotten gains if you try."*—[*Official Report*, 6 July 2020; Vol. 678, c. 664.]

Can he confirm that he will be bringing forward sanctions against bin Salman following this report and that he now finally accepts that it is time to fundamentally reappraise our relationship with Saudi Arabia?

**Dominic Raab:** The hon. Lady is a bit behind the curve here. Of course, we have an important relationship with Saudi Arabia on security, on trade and on other things, but the reality is that it was this Government, and me, who introduced Magnitsky sanctions on 20 Saudis involved in the murder under our global human rights regime—[*Interruption.*] We did it last July. She ought to catch up.

**Lisa Nandy:** I am, frankly, astonished; I genuinely expected a better response from the Foreign Secretary. He will not stand with the family of Jamal Khashoggi as they seek justice. He will not stand to lift a finger against the dirty money flowing into the City of London. He will not stand with our allies in ending arms sales to Saudi Arabia. He will not even defend the children of Yemen against brutal aid cuts by his own Department, even as his Government seek to sustain the conflict that they are party to. Last year, we heard him talk tough about standing up to despots and henchmen, but now he tells us that in response to this report he is not prepared to take a single action, will not stand up to corruption, will not stand against humanitarian catastrophe, will not stand up for press freedom and will not stand up for human rights. Is there a single thing that he will actually stand up for?

**Dominic Raab:** I again say to the hon. Lady that we were already right out in the lead in imposing asset freezes and visa bans on 20 of the most directly responsible. She refers to the US report. The US has not put sanctions on the Crown Prince, as she well knows. More generally, she will have seen the action that we have taken—[*Interruption.*] She ought to listen. On dirty money, we have already said, and I have committed to this House, that we will introduce an extension of the Magnitsky sanctions to cover corruption—[*Interruption.*] She is now going on to talk about Russia. The reality is that we will continue to support standing up for human rights, and I will be introducing to the House Magnitsky sanctions and extensions in the corruption space shortly.

[912814] **Angela Richardson** (Guildford) (Con) [V]: The growing ties between Israel and her Arab neighbours are extremely positive developments that provide an opportunity to reinvigorate the middle east peace process, which has regrettably stalled for many years. Will my right hon. Friend outline what more the UK can do to help support the resumption of direct peace talks between Israelis and Palestinians, alongside our allies in the region?

**Dominic Raab:** I thank my hon. Friend. We have supported the normalisation of relations, which is a good step around the region. Of course, this also led to the suspension of the threat of annexation on the west bank, which was very important. As a result of that, I was able to go to talk to President Abbas and Prime Minister Shtayyeh and encourage them to resume dialogue on west bank issues, which is very important for security, and to make sure that Palestinian public servants are paid. Plans are at least mooted for elections on both sides—both in Israel and on the Palestinian side. Ultimately, we need leadership from both sides to secure the peace that my hon. Friend and other Members want. We need a two-state solution, and the UK will support all those efforts.

[912810] **Jonathan Edwards** (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind) [V]: As we approach the 20th anniversary of the invasion of Afghanistan, we appear no closer to a successful exit strategy. The NATO mission faces difficult choices: leave and see the Afghan Government fall; continue the stalemate and face a permanent involvement in the country; or ramp up the war, with the devastation that follows and no guarantee of success. What discussions are the British Government having with the Biden Administration about the way forward?

**Dominic Raab:** We are having discussions with the Biden Administration on the approach to the proposed US withdrawal or drawdown from Afghanistan. It has to be linked to violence on the ground and to the wider peace talks and the agreements that have been made in Afghanistan between all the local parties, and it has to be based on the delivery of those conditions.

[912818] **Steve Brine** (Winchester) (Con): Given that covid-19 is reported to have killed more than 120,000 of our fellow citizens it is reasonable, in time, to understand where lessons can be learned domestically, but surely it is our moral duty to establish the origins of the virus and how it spread as an international community. So may I ask the Minister: what is the British Government's view on where this came from and on the efficacy of the World Health Organisation's current fact-finding mission to China?

**The Minister for Asia (Nigel Adams):** My hon. Friend asks a very sensible question. The UK co-sponsored the World Health Assembly resolution in May 2020 that agreed an investigation into the origins of covid. It is important that that investigation is given the time it needs. The field mission to Wuhan was a key early step in the investigation. Of course we cannot pre-empt findings, but we will look closely at the field mission's report when it is published. We have been clear that the investigation must be robust, open and scientifically rigorous.

[912811] **Alison McGovern** (Wirral South) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) the urgent question that is to follow on Yemen, which is a human rights catastrophe. Similarly, every Member of this House must acknowledge the humanitarian hellhole that Syria has become over the past decade. Given that the existing programme has now run out, will the Secretary of State update the House on our country's intentions on welcoming refugees to our shores from Syria and the region, and the good quality of life that we will guarantee them once they are here?

**Dominic Raab:** We will of course continue to make sure that we provide vital humanitarian support. I agree with the hon. Lady that the ongoing crisis in Syria is appalling. I think she asked about the Home Office plans for a new global resettlement scheme; that is for the Home Secretary to talk about, but I will—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Lady is right that it is a diplomatic issue, which is why I fully support it.

[912819] **David Simmonds** (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con) [V]: The UK is a global leader in refugee resettlement, and the new UK resettlement scheme will demonstrate global Britain's efforts to tackle humanitarian crises wherever they are. To what extent does my right hon. Friend consider that refugee resettlement is an important part of the UK's wider diplomatic efforts, particularly in respect of supporting those who may now be refugees and have been involved in supporting our military and peacekeeping efforts?

**Dominic Raab:** My hon. Friend raises an important point. The truth is that I would not be here today if it was not for this country's proud tradition of offering

sanctuary to those fleeing persecution. Since 2015, we have resettled 25,000 refugees, with the support of brilliant charities—I always think of Elmbridge CAN in my constituency, which helps new families to settle in. We remain committed to discharging that historic role. The new global resettlement scheme will be developed and launched by the Home Office in due course.

[912812] **Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP) [V]: The perception that corporate interests and market-friendly laws are prioritised over economic fairness, local communities and the environment has resulted in the Indian farming protests. Given the Foreign Office silence on the issue, will the Prime Minister be raising the injustices that the farmers feel when he visits India?

**Dominic Raab:** I appreciate that there are concerns on this issue; we have a large Indian diaspora and have had lots of constituents writing in. I did raise the matter with Foreign Minister Jaishankar when I was in India and we discussed it. Ultimately, the situation is the result of a reform agenda that the elected Government are pressing through. It is of course contentious and we have discussed it, but ultimately it is for the Government of India to decide.

[912825] **Anthony Mangnall** (Totnes) (Con): The Government have made it clear that we must protect the reputation of organisations such as the UN Human Rights Council. Given our work on gender-based violence and the fact that next Monday is International Women's Day, I would be grateful for an update on what work is being undertaken on the preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative and what steps we might take to implement an international body that can support survivors, document crimes and lead prosecutions.

**Nigel Adams:** The PSVI remains a top priority for the UK Government. Since its launch in 2012 we have committed £48 million and funded 85 projects across 29 countries to prevent and respond to conflict-related sexual violence. Of course, the UK's G7 presidency is an excellent opportunity for us to galvanise support for the PSVI.

[912813] **Bambos Charalambous** (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Will the Foreign Secretary confirm the Government's commitment to a bizonal, bicomunal federation as the only basis for a political settlement on the island of Cyprus, ahead of next month's UN-sponsored 5+1 talks in Geneva?

**Dominic Raab:** I was out in Cyprus recently, as I have already discussed, and spoke to President Anastasiades and to Ersin Tatar, the new Turkish Cypriot leader. That is, of course, the starting point. The most important thing that we need to see right now is for both sides to go to those UN 5+1 talks without preconditions, so that we can re-engage in the kind of flexibility and pragmatism that can see lasting and enduring peace for the whole of Cyprus.

[912830] **Marco Longhi** (Dudley North) (Con) [V]: What steps is my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary taking to respond to the ongoing campaign for Papuan independence?

**Nigel Adams:** The UK Government have repeatedly asserted our long-held position that we respect the territorial integrity of Indonesia, including the provinces of Papua and West Papua. The UK Government categorically do not support the activities or views of Papuan separatist activists. The presence of some individuals in the UK, including Benny Wenda, in no way means that we support their position. We engage with a diverse range of cultural and political figures in the Papua region, and our ambassador made a visit to Papua in November, when he met environment, education and human rights experts, as well as the Governor of West Papua.

[912815] **Janet Daby** (Lewisham East) (Lab) [V]: Iranian officials have made it clear that the imprisonment of British dual nationals is directly linked to the £400 million IMS debt. The longer the Government deny that link, the longer Anousheh, Nazanin and Aras will be kept away from their families. Will the Foreign Secretary tell me what consideration has been given to an urgent repayment of the debt through alternative means, such as covid-19 supplies or other medical aid?

**Dominic Raab:** The hon. Lady takes a heartfelt interest in this matter. I have recently spoken to the families of all three British-Iranian dual nationals. Of course, we accept that there is a long-standing dispute in relation to the IMS debt that needs to be resolved, but that is separate from the arbitrary detention of British nationals. Frankly, we should not be giving succour to the idea that anything should happen other than their unconditional and immediate release.

[912831] **Damien Moore** (Southport) (Con) [V]: The International Atomic Energy Agency has confirmed that Iran's uranium stockpile is now more than 14 times over the limit agreed in the 2015 nuclear deal. Does my right hon. Friend believe that the framework is working? What consequences will there be for Iran's continued non-compliance? [R]

**Dominic Raab:** My hon. Friend raises an important issue. Iran's systemic non-compliance with its obligations under the joint comprehensive plan of action are rightly a concern of the whole international community, particularly the state parties to the JCPOA. Frankly, Iran has a clear choice: return to compliance or face increasing economic and diplomatic isolation. On 18 February in Paris, I joined my French and German counterparts and the new US Secretary of State Tony Blinken to reinforce the transatlantic alliance and concerted action to bring Iran back to full compliance, which is our overriding focus.

[912817] **Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): I draw the Secretary of State's attention to War on Want's new report into Israel's military court system in

the occupied west bank. Does he agree that Palestinian civilians should not be tried in military courts? What is his Government doing to support Palestinian human rights defenders who are being tried in them?

**Dominic Raab:** The hon. Lady is right to draw attention to the treatment of Palestinians. The reality is that I do not think there is a bar on the use of military systems of justice under international law—let alone under the International Criminal Court system. Indeed, we use a military justice system with some of the highest standards in the world. What is crucial is that there is adequate due process to ensure that people's rights can be fairly and duly heard.

**Mary Robinson** (Cheadle) (Con) [V]: Yesterday, the last case arising from Jonathan Taylor's whistleblowing concluded, with Paul Bond being sentenced to three and a half years in prison for conspiracy to give corrupt payments. Jonathan Taylor has been vindicated again, but he remains stranded in Croatia due to the Interpol red notice issued by Monaco based on a debunked allegation by his old employer in retaliation for his whistleblowing. Now that the relevant court cases are complete, will my right hon. Friend redouble his efforts to bring Mr Taylor home? Will he also speak to ministerial colleagues about the need for whistleblowing law reform so that, in future, people like Jonathan Taylor get the support and protection they need?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Wendy Morton):** We are providing ongoing consular support to Mr Taylor. Consular staff have been in regular contact with him and his UK lawyer. The British ambassador in Zagreb met him in December to discuss his concerns and explain the FCDO's consular functions. I spoke to the Monégasque Foreign Secretary and the Croatian Secretary of State for European Affairs in November and sought assurances that both authorities were giving full consideration to the fact that Mr Taylor is a whistleblower. The UK is a state party to a number of multilateral conventions that require adequate arrangements to be made for the protection of whistleblowers. The UK has made appropriate provisions to do so in our own law, demonstrating the seriousness with which we take our obligation, and we are encouraging our international partners to do likewise. We are, however, unable to protect whistleblowers in other jurisdictions that may not have the same law.

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

12.34 pm

*Sitting suspended.*

## Yemen: Aid Funding

12.38 pm

**Mr Andrew Mitchell** (Sutton Coldfield) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, if he will make a statement on the level of aid funding to Yemen.

**The Minister for the Middle East and North Africa (James Cleverly)**: I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) for raising this urgent question. The situation in Yemen remains among the worst humanitarian crises in the world. Two thirds of the entire population—more than 20 million people—require some form of humanitarian assistance. The UN estimates that in the first half of this year, 47,000 people will be in famine conditions and 16.2 million will be at risk of starvation. Improving the dire circumstances faced by so many Yemenis continues to be a priority for this Government.

Yesterday, I attended the high-level pledging conference for the United Nations humanitarian appeal for Yemen. I announced that the UK will provide at least—I repeat, at least—£87 million in aid to Yemen over the course of financial year 2021-22. Our total aid contribution since the conflict began was already over £1 billion. This new pledge will feed an additional 240,000 of the most vulnerable Yemenis every month, support 400 health clinics and provide clean water for 1.6 million people. We will also provide one-off cash support to 1.5 million of Yemen's poorest households to help them buy food and basic supplies.

Alongside the money that the UK is spending to reduce humanitarian suffering in Yemen, we continue to play a leading diplomatic role in support of the UN's efforts to end the conflict. Yesterday, I spoke to the United Nations special envoy, Martin Griffiths, and we discussed how the UK could assist him in ending this devastating war. Last week, the United Nations Security Council adopted a UK-drafted resolution that reiterated the Council's support for the United Nations peace process, condemned the Houthi offensive in Marib and attacks on Saudi Arabia and sanctioned Houthi official Sultan Zabin for the use of sexual violence as a tool of war.

Just last night, a Houthi missile hit and injured five civilians in southern Saudi Arabia. I condemn that further attack by the Houthis on civilian targets in Saudi Arabia and reiterate our commitment to help Saudi Arabia defend itself.

We are also working closely with our regional and international partners for peace. On 25 February, the Foreign Secretary spoke to the Saudi Foreign Minister, Faisal bin Farhan, about the Yemen peace process, and he also recently discussed this with the US Secretary of State. I discussed Yemen with the Omani ambassador to the UK on 4 February and spoke to the Yemeni Foreign Minister on 20 January regarding the attack on Aden and the formation of a new Yemeni Cabinet.

The UK is also leading efforts to tackle covid-19 in Yemen and around the world. This month, as part of the UN Security Council presidency, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary called for a ceasefire across the globe to allow vulnerable people living in conflict zones to be vaccinated against covid-19. The UK, as

one the biggest donors to the World Health Organisation and GAVI's COVAX initiative, is helping ensure that millions of vaccine doses get through to people living in crises such as Yemen.

I thank my right hon. Friend for raising this question and thank hon. Members for their continued interest in Yemen. The conflict and humanitarian crisis deserves our attention, and the UK Government remain fully committed to doing what we can to help secure a better future for Yemenis.

**Mr Mitchell**: The Minister is a decent fellow and will not have enjoyed what he announced yesterday. Last night, he will have heard the United Nations Secretary-General tell him that, for Yemen,

“cutting aid is a death sentence.”

Cutting it by 50% is unconscionable. As Sir Mark Lowcock, a senior and respected British official at the UN, said, millions of Yemeni children

“will continue the slow, agonising and obscene process of starving to death”.

I understand that I remain the only European politician who has recently been into Sa'dah in north Yemen to see an acute malnutrition ward in the hospital there, part-funded by the British taxpayer—life-saving work, which will now be halved. My right hon. Friend told the House just last month that

“Yemen will remain a UK priority”—[*Official Report*, 8 February 2021; Vol. 689, c. 31.]

and yet the fifth richest country in the world is cutting support by more than half to one of the poorest countries in the world—and during a global pandemic.

Every single Member of this House was elected just over a year ago on a promise to maintain the 0.7%. Aid has already been cut under that formula because our economy has contracted, but the Government told the House that they would protect seven strategic priorities, including “human preparedness and response”. No one in this House believes that the Foreign Secretary wants to do this. It is a harbinger of terrible cuts to come. Everyone in this House knows that the cut to the 0.7% is not a result of tough choices; it is a strategic mistake with deadly consequences.

Mr Speaker, this is not who we are. This is not how global Britain acts. We are a generous, decent country. The 0.7% is enshrined in law. This House must surely have a vote. We must all search our consciences.

**James Cleverly**: I genuinely thank my right hon. Friend. He speaks with authority and passion as an experienced Member of this House and as a former Secretary of State for International Development. I remind the House that the commitment we made at the pledging conference represents a floor, not a ceiling, and that the figures that we have ultimately distributed in previous years have, in every one of those years, exceeded the figure pledged. We are going through a process at the moment where we work out how we distribute our official development assistance. In whatever way that process concludes, we will remain, in both absolute and percentage terms, one of the most generous ODA-donating countries in the world, and to Yemen itself, we still remain one of the largest donors to that humanitarian crisis.

**Mr Speaker:** I now call the shadow Minister, Preet Kaur Gill, who also has two minutes.

**Preet Kaur Gill** (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: The Government's announcement yesterday at the high pledging conference discarded the British people's proud history of stepping up and supporting those in need. In the middle of a pandemic, when millions stand on the brink of famine, the Government slashed life-saving support to the largest humanitarian crisis in the world, halving direct aid to Yemen weeks after they announced £1.36 billion in new arms licences to Saudi Arabia. This is a devastating reminder of the real world impact that the Government's choices to abandon their manifesto commitment on aid will have on the most vulnerable people and shows that this Government just cannot be trusted to keep their word.

After six years of brutal conflict, two thirds of the Yemeni population rely on food aid to survive and thousands of people in the country are at risk of famine. Cutting aid is a death sentence that this Government have chosen to make, so will the Minister take this opportunity to apologise? Alongside this cut in humanitarian support, the UK continues to sustain the war in Yemen. Will the Minister follow the lead set by President Biden by stopping all UK arms sales to the Saudi-led coalition, so that we can use our role as the penholder on Yemen to help bring this brutal conflict to an end?

If the Foreign Secretary is willing to brazenly slash support to people living in the world's worst humanitarian disaster, despite claiming for months that humanitarian crises were a priority, then the question is, what is going to happen to the rest of the aid budget on other priorities? The Minister has refused

"to talk to the aid and development community about what will be cut"

because he is ashamed. He is ashamed that the Government's cuts will put millions of people's lives at risk. This Government cannot continue to pretend otherwise. So will they publish a full list of the cuts made in 2020 and of the cuts to be made in 2021 by the end of this week?

What we saw yesterday are not the actions of global Britain. That phrase rings hollow. Make no mistake: as the UK abandons its commitment to 0.7%, it is simultaneously undermining our global reputation. Does the Minister believe that he has the support of this House to make this appalling cut and, if so, will he bring forward a vote on the 0.7% commitment? Tomorrow, the Chancellor has a choice. He must reverse his decision to make the UK the only G7 nation to cut its aid budget. He must reverse his Government's retreat from the world stage and celebrate Britain's proud history as a country that stands up for the world's poorest and most vulnerable in society. That is the true test of global Britain.

**James Cleverly:** Our aid budget, our ODA spend, is incredibly important. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has made it clear that, this year, that figure will remain at £10 billion. That £10 billion represents one of the largest aid budgets in both absolute terms and relative terms in the globe. The hon. Member speaks about the change from 0.7% to 0.5%. I remind the House that Labour politicians have been talking about 0.7% of GNI as an ODA budget for decades, yet they never once

got near it. Even in years of benign economic circumstances, they never went above 0.51%. Under Conservative Prime Ministers, this country has spent 0.7% consistently, and we have done so even in difficult economic circumstances. As I am sure the Chancellor will outline tomorrow in the Budget, we are now presented with a unique set of economic circumstances that are unprecedented in our lifetime, representing a constriction of the UK economy unseen in centuries. And yet, against that backdrop, we maintain a commitment to spend £10 billion on the international stage.

Money is not the only thing that the UK can deploy in support of the people of Yemen. I outlined in departmental questions the work that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has done at the international level to bring about change in the UN Security Council. I spoke yesterday with Martin Griffiths, the UN special representative, about the diplomatic efforts the UK can bring to bear to bring about the end of the conflict, because that is the precursor to a truly sustainable improvement in the situation. That is why we condemn the continued attacks by the Houthis and those who support them. That is why we have sanctioned senior Houthi leaders for the use of sexual violence as a tool of war, and that is why we will continue working bilaterally and internationally to bring about a conclusion to this terrible conflict.

**Tom Tugendhat** (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con) [V]: I welcome my right hon. Friend saying that this is a "floor, not a ceiling"; I hope that the ceiling will be somewhat greater than he has announced. Does he agree that the UK's position, while generous, leaves a large gap if there is any cut, and the world's poorest will be the ones to suffer? Has he reached out to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Oman to ask them to help fill the gap, or perhaps even Iran, which has used the Houthi people as its tools and instruments of violence in the region? Has he asked it to stop the instrumentalisation of terror and to perhaps fund the rebuilding after the destruction that it has caused?

**James Cleverly:** My hon. Friend the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee makes a very good point about the convening power that the UK can exercise and the strong bilateral relations we have with countries in the region. I am pleased to see that a number of countries in the Gulf were very generous, even though they, like us, are suffering from economic difficulties. We will continue to lobby the international community for support. I have not had and, unfortunately, I do not think we currently enjoy, the bilateral relations with Iran to make credible requests, or to make requests that will be forthcoming, but we will continue to encourage and push Iran to be a better regional neighbour and a better regional partner. In the immediate term, we strongly encourage Iran to stop supporting the Houthis, and we encourage the Houthis to end their campaign of violence against Yemenis and Saudis alike.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the SNP spokesperson Chris Law, who has one minute.

**Chris Law** (Dundee West) (SNP) [V]: Gosh, this Government should hang their head in shame. The UK cutting humanitarian aid to Yemen by 50% is confirmation that the UK Government are playing a pivotal role in the worst humanitarian disaster in the world. The UK

has shamefully confirmed that it will continue to sell arms to Saudi Arabia, laying bare the reality of this Government's vision for global Britain—profiteering from weapons without concern for the devastation they cause, and relinquishing its responsibility to those who are starving and to save lives. Let us be in no doubt: this is not global Britain—this is more like little Britain.

Indeed, the UK is actively adding to 16 million people being put into hunger, 5 million civilians facing starvation and more than 3 million people being displaced as a result of this conflict. As Mark Lowcock said at the UN,

“If you're not feeding the people, you're feeding the war.”

In response to continued SNP calls to halt UK arms sales to the Saudis, this Government have always stated that they are also the biggest aid contributor, in order to clear their conscience. So I ask the Minister: is his conscience still clear, and what is this Government's response going to be following these death sentence cuts?

**James Cleverly:** I remind the hon. Gentleman that the United Kingdom remains one of the largest donor countries—not just to the Yemen humanitarian crisis appeal, but on the international stage. I also remind him that, just yesterday, Houthis sent missile attacks against civilians that injured Saudis and Yemenis alike. The best thing that can happen to secure a sustainable humanitarian improvement is the end of the conflict, and the UK is working hard to do that. However, countries have the right to defend themselves, and the consistent attacks—both within Yemen and into Saudi—must stop. Our support for the humanitarian situation in Yemen will remain. We remain one of the largest donors and, as I say, we are proud of the fact that we are helping to feed children, and to provide clean water and medical assistance.

**Craig Whittaker** (Calder Valley) (Con) [V]: My right hon. Friend will know that the UK is one of the biggest donors to the crisis in Yemen, committing well over £1 billion in UK aid since the conflict began back in 2015, but we all know that money alone is not enough. Does he agree that progress can be made only through international co-operation, with everyone playing their part to solve the crisis?

**James Cleverly:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Money makes a difference. We recognise that, which is why we remain one of the most generous bilateral donors to the humanitarian appeal. But money itself will not bring about a positive conclusion to the situation in Yemen. That is the philosophy that underpinned the merger of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and the Department for International Development. To ensure that our diplomatic efforts and our development efforts go hand-in-hand, the Foreign Secretary and I regularly raise the issues of this conflict with regional partners and others, and work with the United Nations and Special Representative Martin Griffiths to bring about a permanent conclusion to the conflict in Yemen. We will continue to do so until that comes about.

**Sarah Champion** (Rotherham) (Lab) [V]: Minister, what is the reason behind cutting the aid to Yemen by 60%? What impact assessment has been made of cutting aid to those who were previously supported? I am

particularly thinking about the impact on women and girls, people with disabilities and internally displaced people.

**James Cleverly:** I remind the hon. Lady, for whom I have a huge amount of respect, and the House that, as I said in my speech, this represents a floor, not a ceiling. In every year previously, we have exceeded our initial pledging total, and we hope to be able to do so again in this situation. However, I also remind the House that we face an unprecedented economic situation. The Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and the Chancellor have all made it clear that this is a temporary reduction and that we will seek to get back to the 0.7% as soon as the economic circumstances allow us to do so. We will continue our work on the international sphere to address what we hope to be the short-term issues of this humanitarian crisis, while putting in the full weight of UK diplomatic efforts to try to bring about a sustainable and peaceful solution to the conflict.

**Christian Wakeford** (Bury South) (Con): Our £214 million-worth of aid funding for Yemen this year will support at least 500,000 vulnerable people each month to help them buy their food and household essentials, treat 55,000 children for malnutrition, and provide 1 million people with improved water supply and basic sanitation. Will my right hon. Friend reassure the House that he is stressing to the conflict parties that it is essential that they allow this aid to reach the areas that it is intended to help? Does he agree that, given these figures, now is not the time to be reducing aid to those whom we supply in Yemen who are most in need?

**James Cleverly:** I recognise the point that my hon. Friend makes about the totality of our aid spending and my colleagues will have heard that. We also very much support his point about ensuring that the aid gets to the people who need it and that we maintain humanitarian corridors. That is why we have spoken with the Houthis and others about ensuring that those humanitarian corridors are maintained.

**Jeremy Corbyn** (Islington North) (Ind) [V]: The crisis in Yemen is wholly human made. Thousands have died as a result of the war, thousands of children have lost homes and lost schools, and poverty and starvation are the order of the day. Britain's record in this is appalling. Throughout this whole conflict, we have armed Saudi Arabia knowing full well that those missiles are killing people in Yemen, and at the same time claiming to be the harbingers of peace by organising a resolution at the United Nations. Will the Minister make it very clear that all arms sales to Saudi Arabia will stop and that Britain will be a determined partner in trying to bring about a peace process through a ceasefire as quickly as possible and to build good relations with all countries in the region? Too many people have died. The conflict has gone on too long and it simply has to stop. We should be a party to ending the war, not promoting the war.

**James Cleverly:** The right hon. Gentleman speaks with an authoritative voice, particularly on Iran. Perhaps if he would also call upon the Iranian regime to no longer give lethal support to the Houthis, that might be a big step in the right direction to bring about sustainable peace in Yemen.

**Mr David Davis** (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): There is a strong convention that before a Government undertake a policy that puts lives at risk, they get prior approval from this House. We cannot make a 50% cut in this budget without cutting into crisis and healthcare support, thereby putting at least 100,000 children's lives at risk. Will my right hon. Friend guarantee that before the Budget votes are held next week we can have a written statement giving a breakdown of the cuts made this year in the aid budget and undertaking that no more cuts will be undertaken unless and until this House approves it?

**James Cleverly:** I am not completely sure that the convention my right hon. Friend refers to is relevant in this situation. As the Foreign Secretary has said before, we are looking very carefully at what is required by law. The legislation envisaged that the 0.7% target may not be met in a particular year in the light of economic and fiscal circumstances. The legislation provides for reporting to Parliament in the event that the target is not met. The Government obviously intend to abide by the legislation. The economic situation is difficult to predict, but we do wish to get back up to 0.7% as soon as the economic circumstances allow.

**Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD) [V]: The Government's appalling decision to cut aid to Yemen has been described as "a death sentence" by the UN Secretary-General, and he is right. This enormous cut, in a year when 400,000 children under five might starve to death, is not only heartless but, just like the cut to the 0.7%, damages the UK's international reputation, and they are doing this just weeks after announcing £1.36 billion in new arms sales to Saudi Arabia—the exact opposite of what the United States is doing. Is this what we can now expect—the UK Government shrinking away from their commitments, leaving other, more compassionate countries to pick up the slack?

**James Cleverly:** The hon. Lady implies that expenditure is the only appropriate measure for compassion. If that is the case, she should recognise that the UK is one of the most generous ODA-donating countries in the world, in both absolute terms and relative terms. I therefore remind her that she, and indeed the House, should remain proud of the position the UK takes. However, I also remind her, and the House, that we face unprecedented economic circumstances, and the quicker that those are resolved, the quicker we can get back to being the generous international aid donor that we all wish to be.

**Damian Green** (Ashford) (Con) [V]: The legislation allows the Government to miss the 0.7% target by accident or in an emergency, but not to plan to miss it for an indefinite number of years ahead. Can my right hon. Friend give a commitment today that further cuts will not be made until the necessary legislation promised to this House by Ministers who announced this policy has been put to a vote so that this House can express a view?

**James Cleverly:** I hear what my right hon. Friend says. The Foreign Secretary, as I said, is looking carefully at the requirements of the legislation. I can assure my right hon. Friend, from this position at the Dispatch

Box, that the Government are well able to listen to the mood of the House without the need for legislation in this Session.

**Hilary Benn** (Leeds Central) (Lab) [V]: The Minister referred to the humanitarian aid that the UK has already given to Yemen, which we recognise, but I am afraid he has failed today to explain why the Government have now decided to cut that contribution by more than half. Doing the right thing in the past is not a justification for doing the wrong thing now. Yesterday, a Yemeni aid worker co-ordinating food aid distribution, said this:

"Children are dying every day here. It is not a moral decision to abandon Yemen."

Why have the Government done this when for example Germany, which is also facing the same unprecedented economic situation—to use his own words—has managed to pledge twice as much as the United Kingdom?

**James Cleverly:** Different countries at yesterday's pledging events put forward their pledges. Some increased their pledges; some reduced their pledges. Each country is facing its own economic challenges. The UK remains, despite the unprecedented economic circumstances we face, one of the largest donors both in general terms and in terms of humanitarian support for Yemen. I would also make the point that while the money is of course incredibly important—that is why we have committed to at least £87 million this financial year—there are other resources we bring to bear to bring about an improvement in this situation, including our voice on the international stage, our lobbying power and our political power. We will continue to work to bring about an end to the conflict in Yemen.

**Mr Speaker:** We need to get on with the list. I am going to finish at ten past.

**Anthony Mangnall** (Totnes) (Con): The Minister started his remarks by saying that money matters. Yes it does, but what this cut represents is a cut to projects, a cut to aid and a cut to assistance that will put lives in jeopardy. If the Government are so reassured by their position, then I suggest that they bring a vote to the House on this issue and they can truly gauge the strength of feeling. We have a moral duty to lead on this issue and I hope he will consider bringing a vote before it is too late.

**James Cleverly:** As I said previously, the Foreign Secretary is looking at the legal requirements around the situation. I completely understand my hon. Friend's passion, but I remind him and the House that we remain one of the largest donors in this humanitarian crisis.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): According to the report published yesterday by the all-party group for international freedom of religion or belief, the last remaining Jewish communities in Yemen were ordered to leave in 2020 and the Yemeni Christian community, which once numbered some 41,000, has now shrunk to just a few thousand. Moreover, the Yemeni Baha'i community faced increased persecution at the hands of Houthi authorities last year. Will the Minister share his views on how aid spending in Yemen can be better used to support religious and belief minority groups in Yemen?

**James Cleverly:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. The UK provides secondees to the office of Martin Griffiths, the UN special representative. A number of those secondees focus specifically on broad engagement with minorities within the peace process. I have spoken on a number of occasions about the importance of ensuring protection for minority communities and religious minorities in conflicts, and about getting an inclusive set of people around the negotiating table once peace negotiations are under way.

**Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con) [V]: As chair of the all-party group for Yemen, yesterday I spoke to some very brave women from within Marib, which is under long-term siege from the Houthis. They told me that most of the Houthi forces are young men and teenage boys recruited from the most impoverished parts of Yemen. They also told me that Marib is now hosting over 2 million displaced people across 144 camps. Many children are not just suffering from famine and disease; they have been deeply traumatised after having been driven out by the Houthis. They all rely on generous UK aid and the example it sets to other countries who need to step up in the humanitarian aid effort and the subsequent reconstruction. How can indicating a cut in UK aid at this crucial time do anything but prolong this terrible conflict?

**James Cleverly:** The situation my hon. Friend describes in Marib is deeply concerning. We have called on the Houthis to end their assault. Marib has become the temporary home for many internally displaced people, and the situation there is dire. A number of people have mentioned our support for, or our relationship with, neighbouring countries, and of course defending Marib against this Houthi assault is part of the conversations we have. But, ultimately, the best thing we can do is bring about a swift end to this conflict.

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP) [V]: No matter how much the Minister attempts to hide behind how much the UK gives, it will not disguise the impact that this brutal 60% cut will have on the life chances of Yemenis. Save the Children says that already 400,000 children under the age of five are at risk of starving to death this year, so I ask the Minister: how many deaths are he and this Tory Government prepared to have on their conscience, because they certainly do not act in my name?

**James Cleverly:** The UK has consistently been one of the largest donors to the humanitarian appeal, and our money is keeping people alive. We are very proud of that fact. The economic circumstances we are currently living through have meant that we have to temporarily reduce the amount of money we are spending in overseas development assistance, but as has been made clear by the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary, the Chancellor and others, as soon as the economic circumstances allow us to get back to where we were, we will do so.

**Mr Tobias Ellwood** (Bournemouth East) (Con): The humanitarian crisis is terrible, as has been said, and there are also more international terrorist attacks organised from Yemen than anywhere else in the world. The Biden Administration is rewriting their foreign policy towards Yemen. I cannot think of a better opportunity to end

this tragic civil war, but I am not picking up a Yemen strategy that befits the strap line of global Britain. May I ask the Minister to match the political courage of our closest security ally in tackling the humanitarian crisis, cutting arms exports and being ready to lead any peacekeeping force, should the UN require it, once a ceasefire is agreed?

**James Cleverly:** Yemen remains one of the priority areas for the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. As I say, I spoke only yesterday to Martin Griffiths, and we discussed what further support the UK Government can provide for his work to bring about a sustainable ceasefire. The House will have heard, and indeed my Government colleagues will have heard, the suggestions my right hon. Friend has put forward. We will consider all suggestions to bring about an improvement in Yemen, but at this stage I cannot commit to the points he has made.

**Gill Furniss** (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): The world's largest humanitarian crisis is getting worse. Blockades of ports and airports are restricting vital humanitarian aid getting to the 80% of the population who need it. This year alone, 2.3 million children under the age of five face acute malnutrition. Cutting support as the country battles coronavirus and faces a cholera outbreak is callous and heartless. Can the Minister explain how this fits into the Government's pledge to build a global Britain?

**James Cleverly:** The hon. Lady makes a very good point about access for humanitarian aid, and I am very proud of the fact that the UK Government have lobbied international partners to maintain those humanitarian access routes. We have also provided support in a technical manner to help assess the best way of distributing aid so that it gets to the people most in need. We will continue to provide not just financial support, but technical support to help the people of Yemen, while also working to bring about a conclusion to this conflict.

**David Mundell** (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con) [V]: It is essential that our aid is effective in Yemen, so can I ask the Minister what recent discussions he has had with his international counterparts and the UN regarding the recent panel of experts report on Yemen, and whether he will agree to meet me and representatives of humanitarian organisations, local NGOs and the Yemeni private sector? Their vital role in providing essential food and commodities to Yemenis and supplying the humanitarian operation has been undermined by the serious shortcomings and factual inaccuracies contained within the panel's report.

**James Cleverly:** I thank my right hon. Friend for the point he has made today and also for the correspondence we have exchanged on this very important issue. We are well aware of the allegations made in the panel of experts' most recent report, and they are significant and concerning. We share the panel's vision for the Government of Yemen and the Yemen central bank to become more accountable. I am more than happy to ensure that he, I and people more knowledgeable about these issues are able to speak in the near future.

**Zarah Sultana** (Coventry South) (Lab) [V]: The Minister began his remarks by saying that improving the situation for Yemenis was

“a priority for this Government.”

How he can say that with a straight face I do not know. Not only has he announced a 50% cut in aid to Yemen, but since the Saudi-led war in Yemen began, his Government have licensed £6.7 billion-worth of arms sales to the Saudis. That is British-made bombs dropped from British-made jets flown by British-trained pilots. Instead of warm words and crocodile tears, will the Minister take the necessary action for peace and end arms sales to Saudi Arabia?

**James Cleverly:** The hon. Lady raises this issue on the day after Houthi missiles were sent into civilian areas of Saudi. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia seeks to defend itself against such aggression, as every country in the world has the right to do. Our arms export regime is robust, and the best thing that we can do, as I say, to help the people of Yemen is to encourage all the parties, both those in Yemen and regional partners, to bring this conflict to an end.

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

1.15 pm

*Sitting suspended.*

## Covid-19 Update

1.17 pm

**The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock):** Today marks 12 weeks since Margaret Keenan became the first person in the world to receive a clinically approved vaccine for covid-19. She has since been joined by over 20 million other citizens of this country in the biggest and fastest vaccination effort the world has ever seen.

This is a phenomenal achievement. Our vaccination programme is a national success story for the whole United Kingdom, and the reason it matters is that it allows us to replace the protection currently given by restrictions on our freedoms with the protection from science.

The data confirms that this strategy is working because the vaccines work. The number of hospital admissions is falling faster than the number of new cases, whereas in the first peak it fell more slowly, and the fall in hospitalisations is faster among the age groups vaccinated first than in younger age groups yet to get a jab.

I can tell the House about some further analysis that backs up this excellent news. The halving time of hospital admissions is now every 18 days. Over the past fortnight, it has fallen for those aged over 85 from 18 days to 15. This morning, the Office for National Statistics published data showing the number of deaths falling by over a quarter a week in mid-February. More than that, the number of deaths each day is not only falling faster than after the first peak, but it is falling faster in the over-80s, who got the jab first, compared with the under-80s. The number of daily deaths is halving every 12 days, but among the over-80s it is now halving every 10, so while the fall in cases is decelerating, the fall in the number of deaths is accelerating. What all this shows is that the vaccine is working, reducing the number of deaths among those who were vaccinated first and preventing hospital admissions. This is real-world evidence that the vaccine is protecting the NHS and saving lives, that the 12-week dosing regime is saving lives, and that this country's strategy is working.

As well as this real-world data, I would like to update the House on two new pieces of analytical research published over the last 24 hours. First, this morning the Office for National Statistics published new data on the levels of protection people have. They show that up to 11 February, one in four people are estimated to have antibodies against coronavirus in England, up from one in five. The levels are highest in the over-80s, the first group to be vaccinated, showing again the protection from the vaccine across the country. The second piece of research, published last night, shows that a single dose of either the Oxford or the Pfizer vaccine delivers protection against severe infection in the over-70s, with a more than 80% reduction in hospitalisations. It is great news that both vaccines work so effectively. In fact, the protection from catching covid 35 days after the first jab is even slightly better for the Oxford jab than for the Pfizer, so people can have confidence that they will get protection, whichever jab they are offered.

I am grateful for the work of colleagues across the House in promoting vaccine take-up, which has helped to deliver some of the highest levels of enthusiasm for vaccination in the whole world, and I am pleased to

inform the House that we are now inviting over-60s to be vaccinated too. Although the day-to-day figures for supply are lumpy, we have some bumper weeks ahead later this month. Given that our vaccination programme began 12 weeks ago today, from now we begin in earnest our programme of second vaccinations, which ramps up over the month of March. I can assure the House that we have factored these second jabs into our supply projections, and we are on track to meet our target of offering a vaccine to all priority groups 1 to 9 by 15 April and to all adults by the end of July.

Our vaccination programme means that we can set out our road map to freedom and put this pandemic behind us, but we must stay vigilant because covid-19, like all viruses, mutates over time. Part of controlling any virus is responding to new variants as they arise, just as we do with flu each year. Knowing this, we invested in genomic sequencing right at the start of the pandemic, giving the UK one of the biggest genomic sequencing capabilities in the world. Thanks to that, we have been able to spot variants here at home and support others to detect variants in other parts of the world.

I would like to update the House on the six cases of the variant of concern that was first identified in Manaus in Brazil and that we have now identified here in the UK. We know that five of those six people quarantined at home, as they were legally required to do. We have been in contact with them, and I would like to put on record my gratitude to them for doing their duty and following the rules. Whenever we identify cases of a new variant, we respond fast and come down hard by bringing in enhanced sequencing and testing, so we are stepping up our testing and sequencing in south Gloucestershire as a precaution. We have no information to suggest that the variant has spread further.

Unfortunately, one of the six cases completed a test but did not successfully complete the contact details. Incidents like this are rare and occur only in around 0.1% of tests. I can update the House with the latest information on identifying this case. We have identified the batch of home test kits in question, and our search has narrowed from the whole country down to 379 households in the south-east of England. We are contacting each one. We are grateful that a number of potential cases have come forward following the call that we put out over the weekend, and I would like to thank colleagues from across the House who have helped us to get the message out there.

Our current vaccines have not yet been studied against this variant. We are working to understand what impact it might have, but we do know that the variant has caused significant challenges in Brazil, so we are doing all we can to stop the spread of this new variant in the UK, to analyse its effects, to develop an updated vaccine that works on all these variants of concern, and to protect the progress that we have made as a nation. This country is on the road to recovery and we have freedom on the horizon. We must proceed with caution because although we are moving quickly, the virus moves quickly too. Let us not waver; let us do whatever it takes to keep this virus under control.

1.25 pm

**Jonathan Ashworth** (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): As always, I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. On the Brazilian variant, in

January and February cases here were running at tens of thousands a day and we were in lockdown—we are still in lockdown—because of our own home-grown new infectious variant, yet people were allowed to fly in from abroad, bringing the P1 Brazilian mutation with them. Throughout history, epidemic after epidemic has exploited international travel. Surely it is obvious that tougher border controls should have been in place sooner.

I welcome the progress that the Secretary of State has made on identifying the batch, but how on earth can a test be processed that does not collect the contact details? What mechanisms will be put in place to fix that in the future? Twenty-two billion pounds has been allocated to this system, and it feels as though someone has vanished into thin air. Can he assure us that it will not happen again?

I note that the Secretary of State said that there is no information to suggest wider spread of this variant, but he will recall that John Edmunds from SAGE told the Home Affairs Committee in January that for every identified South African variant, there were probably another 30 unidentified. Can the Secretary of State tell us whether he has received any estimates of the number of unidentified cases in the wider community?

I welcome the tremendous progress that has been made on vaccination and driving infection rates down. It is a testament to the NHS and everybody involved in the vaccination programme, and to everybody who is playing their part in this lockdown. We also know that the virus can quickly rebound and that mutations could evade vaccination. We are in a race against evolution, so we have a long way to go. To be frank, nowhere is covid-safe until everywhere is covid-safe. None of us wants to yo-yo in and out of lockdowns, so will the Secretary of State guarantee that the lockdown easing will, as promised, absolutely be based on data, not dates, and that the assessment time between each step is not compromised? I welcome the extra surge testing, but what is the current timeframe for genetic sequencing? How can it be sped up?

Overall trends are coming down, and that is welcome, but infections in some areas remain stubbornly high. The national average is 100 cases per 100,000, but in Leicester, my city, the infection rate is one of the highest in the country at 222 per 100,000. In Ashfield, the infection rate is 246 per 100,000. In Hyndburn, the infection rate has increased to 162 per 100,000. In Oadby and Wigston, it has gone up. In Watford, it has gone up. In Worthing, it has gone up. What steps will be taken to ensure that areas such as Ashfield, Leicester, Watford, Worthing, Hyndburn and so on are not left behind when the national lockdown restrictions begin to lift, or will those places remain in localised lockdowns? Will the local authorities be given extra resources to do more door-to-door testing and retrospective tracing? Will workplaces in those areas be inspected by the Health and Safety Executive to ensure they are covid-secure? And of course, will people finally be given decent sick pay and isolation support?

Many areas such as Leicester are facing a double whammy of relatively high infection rates and relatively low vaccination rates. What further action will now be taken to drive up vaccination rates among hesitant communities? Will the Secretary of State fund faith groups, community groups and local public health teams to develop more targeted and tailored local vaccination campaigns?

[Jonathan Ashworth]

Tomorrow's Budget cannot be about the Chancellor's Instagram account; it has to be about the NHS and social care accounts. Can the Secretary of State guarantee that tomorrow we will get an increase in public health allocations to help public health teams plan their local covid response over the next year? Will our NHS heroes get the pay rise they deserve? With 224,000 patients waiting more than 12 months for treatment, will our NHS get the resources it needs to deliver the patient care that patients and our constituents deserve?

**Matt Hancock:** The right hon. Gentleman is quite right to thank all those who are responsible for the vaccine roll-out. It has been an absolutely remarkable effort. He is right to say that the NHS has played its part—it has played a central part—but it has been more than the NHS. It has been the brilliance of the logistics, in particular, of our armed services. It has been the volunteers who have come forward in their droves. It has been the regulator and the partnership with private industry, and I think that this model of a combination of academic excellence and partnership between Government, regulator and private industry is one on which we can build. I know it is a model that they do not like much on the Opposition side of the House—

**Jonathan Ashworth:** I like it.

**Matt Hancock:** The right hon. Gentleman says he likes it. We always knew that he was misplaced over there. His problem is that sometimes his rhetoric is aimed more at his Back Benchers than what he thinks is right. I urge him to listen to his conscience and to back us and the businesses that are making this vaccination roll-out happen, and to put that support into practice.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about sequencing—again, done by a brilliant combination of academics, Government and private businesses. We are now sequencing a third of the positive tests in this country. That is not yet a full survey of all the positives, although we are working towards that, but it does mean that we are able to spot the variants much more than anywhere else in the world. We currently provide around 40% of the total global sequences of this disease—this virus—and we are driving up that sequencing capacity.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about increasing the uptake of vaccination. He was quite right to, and we are working with faith groups and local directors of public health and others. Councils have a very important role to play alongside pharmacists and, of course, GPs in increasing the vaccination uptake. However, the vaccination uptake has been very, very high—higher than I expected—and I am really thrilled about that.

Finally, the right hon. Gentleman asked about making sure that the road map follows data, not dates. We have rigorously set out the gap between the steps to ensure that we can see the effect of one step before we take the other. That is with the goal of having this road map as a one-way route out of restrictions so that we can all get back to the freedom that we crave.

**Jeremy Hunt** (South West Surrey) (Con) [V]: I congratulate the Health Secretary on the brilliant progress of the vaccine roll-out, which is a personal achievement for him as well as a collective achievement for the

Government. I also thank him for transparency in that programme and the transparency on the risks of the new Brazilian variant.

I would like to ask about transparency in another area, which is the new integrated care systems that he is planning in his White Paper and the concerns expressed by the Nuffield Trust, the King's Fund, the Health Foundation and NHS providers at this morning's Health and Social Care Committee about the lack of detail on how the public will know how well their local ICS is doing. Sir Robert Francis told the Committee that he favoured asking the CQC to Ofsted-rate the new ICSs and I wonder whether my right hon. Friend thinks that that might be a solution to the accountability issue.

**Matt Hancock:** Transparency has played a vital role in our approach to responding to this virus, and I think that is an important lesson from it that should be heeded globally. In terms of the future of the NHS arranged around the ICSs, that transparency will be important, too. There will be a crucial role for the Care Quality Commission, which currently rates hospitals according to, as my right hon. Friend put it, an Ofsted-style rating. It is vital that the CQC has a similar role when it comes to ICSs, and I look forward to working with him and other members of his Committee to make sure that we get the details of that right.

**Dr Philippa Whitford** (Central Ayrshire) (SNP) [V]: Although the number of cases of the Brazilian variant is thankfully small, it is a warning that being tested in advance does not rule out travellers carrying covid. The South African variant is resistant to antibodies in previous covid patients, and there is concern that both variants may be resistant to vaccine-induced immunity and could therefore undermine the success of the vaccination programme.

The Brazilian variant has already been identified outside South America, and the South African strain is present in 35 countries not on the red list. The arrival of the Brazilian strain via both Switzerland and Paris demonstrates the various routes to the UK from high-risk countries and shows how a traveller can avoid the current hotel quarantine system by separating the legs of their journey. Those infected spent several hours in close quarters with other travellers, who would not be subject to hotel quarantine even now.

I assume that the Government are tracing the passengers from the flights, but with genomics taking some time, the window for worrying variants to get a foothold in the UK before they are discovered is significant. The situation would not have arisen with comprehensive hotel quarantine, as advised by SAGE, so why did the Secretary of State agree to such an inadequate system? Can he tell us the view of the Joint Biosecurity Centre? Does he recognise that quarantining just 1% of international arrivals does not protect the UK from these variants, or protect it from those that may evolve in other parts of the world? Will the Government now review their hotel quarantine policy and make it fit for purpose?

**Matt Hancock:** The hon. Lady is completely wrong, and she knows it. Quarantine is in place for 100% of passenger arrivals in this country. In fact, this episode, in which all those we have successfully contacted—all five—have fully isolated and quarantined at home as

required, demonstrates that the policy is working. We have further strengthened it and introduced hotel quarantine, and that will no doubt give further reassurance. The hon. Lady's characterisation is wrong, and some of the descriptions of the organisations involved are wrong as well. I am happy to ensure that she gets a private briefing so that she can understand the situation in future.

**Mrs Pauline Latham** (Mid Derbyshire) (Con) [V]: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the vaccine roll-out and on the use of the SureScreen tests, which were bought local to me. The pressure on the NHS due to coronavirus has caused the cancellation of thousands of elective operations. What plans does my right hon. Friend have to ensure that hospitals catch up on cancer diagnosis and care and cardiothoracic diagnosis and surgery? How fast does he expect to progress that?

**Matt Hancock:** My hon. Friend makes two critical points. The first is that the manufacture and purchasing of British-made tests is an incredibly important project. I thank SureScreen in her constituency for working closely with us over several months. We now have a product that we can all be proud of and that will test people in Britain to help break chains of transmission and control this virus. I am grateful for her work in that regard.

I also agree with her second point. The spending review put aside £1 billion for the recovery of elective operations, as well as half a billion pounds for the recovery of mental health services. That is crucial for cancer and all the other elective areas, including cardiothoracic, and we will publish further details of the recovery programme soon. The NHS is just exiting a stage of significant pressure—more than 10,000 people are still in hospitals with covid—and we need to ensure that staff get some rest and recuperation, but next year will be all about the recovery my hon. Friend talks about. The money has been allocated, and we will need to get on with it.

**Yvette Cooper** (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab) [V]: The Brazil variant cases arrived a month after I raised this issue with the Prime Minister, and they show not only the problems of delays, but the limitations of the pre-travel tests that did not catch those cases. Even now, 99% of the 15,000 daily arrivals are not covered by hotel quarantine, and most people can still travel home from the airport by tube, train or even plane, mixing with others—as some of these travellers did—without being tested on arrival in the UK. Why are the Government still refusing to introduce additional tests on arrival, and still allowing international passengers to travel onwards on UK public transport? Does the Secretary of State recognise that those gaps in the system will let more new variant cases spread?

**Matt Hancock:** These cases would be caught by the new hotel quarantine policy. The right hon. Lady talks about the need for more testing, and we have introduced tests on day 2 and day 8, to ensure that we keep everybody who arrives as a passenger in the UK under the necessary level of surveillance.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con) [V]: My right hon. Friend will be aware that my constituency is extremely diverse in its racial and religious makeup, and our

national health service staff have done a brilliant job in keeping up the fantastic vaccination rate during this period. However, we are still having to combat the anti-vaxx propaganda that is going out. How will my right hon. Friend ensure that people get the truth about the wisdom of taking the vaccine, regardless of what race, religion, and cultural background they come from?

**Matt Hancock:** That is an incredibly important question, and I pay tribute to the work that my hon. Friend has done in getting that message out. In Harrow we are vaccinating in mosques, temples, and GP surgeries. A critical part of the roll-out is to ensure that the message gets to everybody that this vaccine is safe and it works. It is no good just my saying that. We want to, and we are, engaging with leaders of all communities—faith leaders, and people who have strong voices in their community. Critically, we must ensure that people feel as much as possible that the vaccination effort is accessible to them. It is on us to ensure that the vaccines are easy to get hold of, and that people get answers to any reasonable questions they may have. I look forward to working further with my hon. Friend on delivering that across Harrow and the whole of the country.

**Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD) [V]: I am sure the Secretary of State will agree that every hour is vital in tracking down new positive cases, particularly new cases of new variants. Will he explain why the eye-watering £22 billion that has been spent on the test and trace system does not track each and every test that is sent out, based on a unique code for every test? Surely that would help close the net on positive tests much quicker than the public calls for help that we have seen over the past few days, when that vital information is missing when each test is returned.

**Matt Hancock:** I am not sure you were in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, when I addressed that precise question in my statement. Not having the contact details happens in about 0.1% of tests. In this case, we think the test was done as part of a home test kit, when it is incumbent on the individual to set out those details. Home test kits can be sent to someone's home, in which case of course we have the details of where it was sent. Alternatively, in response to surges, tests can be taken round by local authority teams and dropped off. We therefore need to find out exactly where this test was dropped off. What the hon. Lady omitted to say is that the team has done a good job of narrowing down where that may be to 379 households. The call-out at the weekend was answered with a number of leads, and we are working hard to make sure we find the individual concerned.

**Aaron Bell** (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con) [V]: I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. Both the scientific news and the progress of our vaccine roll-out suggest that we are well on the way to getting back to normal. In particular, I was delighted to learn about the fantastic new data showing that both the Oxford and Pfizer vaccines are effective in hugely reducing hospitalisations and deaths from covid and, indeed, that the Oxford jab, which is being manufactured here in Newcastle-under-Lyme, may even be the more effective of the two. Will he join me in welcoming the fact that our European neighbours, such as France, have recognised that fact and are moving to allow this terrific vaccine to protect the lives of older people there, just as it has done in the UK?

**Matt Hancock:** I am delighted to see any country recognise the life-saving value of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine, as we recognise the life-saving value of all that have passed assessment by our regulator, the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency. We know that this vaccine is not only safe but is saving lives and stopping hospitalisations right across this country right now. I pay tribute to the scientists behind it, who have done so much work to get it to this place, and it is simply fantastic to see in the data with the naked eye that these vaccines are saving lives.

**Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP) [V]:** I congratulate the Secretary of State on having the temerity and leadership to identify early on that vaccination and getting a good vaccine was the way ahead. Here we are, leading the way for not only Europe but the world. Indeed, a few weeks ago, the Irish Government and Europe tried to steal vaccines out of the arms of people in Northern Ireland because they were so jealous of how well the United Kingdom was doing. With that in mind, what will the Secretary of State do in late summer, given the fact that we have eight times the amount of vaccine that the United Kingdom will need? Is a list being compiled of needy countries where the United Kingdom can help people with vaccination?

**Matt Hancock:** Yes, absolutely. While I am so proud of the work that we have done in this United Kingdom to develop the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine and to buy vaccines from around the world that are safe and effective, so that we are able to vaccinate everybody here at home, I am also cognisant of the fact that vaccination around the world will be necessary. I was very pleased to see that COVAX started vaccinating in Ghana last week. It currently looks as if we may have excess vaccines in the future, and we have clearly committed that we will make them available around the world.

We know for sure that we seek to vaccinate with two doses every adult in the UK. There may well be a need for a third vaccination over the autumn against variants, and there is currently a clinical trial considering the vaccination of under-18s. So the exact number of vaccines that we will need for the UK population is not yet known, but we are keen to ensure that we then go on to support, with vaccines and with the money that we have already pledged, the vaccination of the most underdeveloped parts of the world.

**Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con) [V]:** The Secretary of State knows how well the vaccination programme is going here in Warwickshire, and his remarks at Friday's national briefing were greatly appreciated here. Many of the residents being vaccinated at Locke House in Rugby have asked me about the road back to normality, and some have asked about getting some sun on a foreign holiday. Could he say something about any plans the Government are considering for people wishing to travel both at home and abroad to be able to demonstrate that they have received their vaccination through some form of certification?

**Matt Hancock:** Coventry and Warwickshire have done an amazing job, and I was very pleased to see them top the ranks published on Thursday of the areas of England that have vaccinated the most. I congratulate my hon. Friend and his team.

On foreign holidays, we said in the road map that international holidays will not be allowed before 17 May. We are working with the global travel taskforce, which met this lunchtime, just before I came to the House. It is chaired by my right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary. I am on it, along with Home Office and Foreign Office colleagues and representatives from the travel industry—from the airlines, cruise ships and others. That will report by 12 April. Last year, international travel restrictions were about restricting the number of cases due to high prevalence elsewhere when the prevalence here was low. The challenge now is that we have to take into consideration the risks from variants of concern, which means that more understanding about the impact of vaccines on variants of concern, such as the one first discovered in Manaus in Brazil that we were talking about earlier, is critical to answering the question of when we will be able safely to reopen international travel.

**Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op) [V]:** I received some welcome news this morning that Lambeth's local covid vaccination team is one of the highest performing teams in the country. Our local clinical commissioning group reports that 85% of people over 75 and 89% of residents in care homes have now been vaccinated. Here in Vauxhall, we have had to implement the surge testing operation in the past few days because a case of the South African variant was discovered locally. This is all down to the tireless efforts of our primary care workers, nurses, GPs, pharmacies and an army of volunteers. I am concerned, though, that despite this heroic effort, there is still some misinformation and vaccine hesitancy. Does the Secretary of State agree that more needs to be done to counter this misinformation and to support the vaccine roll-out and take-up among our black, Asian and ethnic minority communities?

**Matt Hancock:** Yes, I do. I want to add one more person to the long list of people whom the hon. Lady rightly thanked for their incredible work of getting take-up in Lambeth to as high as 85% among the over-75s, and that is her. She has played a personal leadership role, and I thank her and pay tribute to her for that. There is still much more work to do, and I hope that we can keep working together on it.

**Jane Stevenson (Wolverhampton North East) (Con) [V]:** The pace and scale of the vaccination programme has been incredible, and we owe a debt of thanks to everyone involved. In Wolverhampton, we have kept pace by using a variety of locations, including our leisure and community centres. As we all look forward to restrictions ending, I hope that these public buildings will be returned for leisure and community use. For how long does the Secretary of State predict that we will need a mass vaccination programme? With the potential need for a rolling programme of booster injections or vaccination against new variants, what infrastructure is being planned so that we can protect our entire population for as long as is necessary without overburdening our NHS?

**Matt Hancock:** My hon. Friend raises a very important point: free the leisure centres! Many are being used as vaccination centres now, but, like her, I look forward to the day when they can be used for the purpose for which they were built—as leisure centres. It is important that, should we need a continued vaccination programme, for instance, over the summer and into the autumn, as

seems likely, we will have to move to more permanent places or places that are free to be used as vaccination centres over that period. In fact, that has already started to happen. We have already started to move some of our testing and vaccination centres to more semi-permanent sites to free up the original sites that we started with, because we needed things to move incredibly quickly. That is an important consideration. Frankly, it is best done as close to the local area as possible, so it is right that I do not get involved in each individual one. I am absolutely certain that the NHS in Wolverhampton is far better placed to make those sorts of decisions than I am from this Dispatch Box, but I hope that it will keep my hon. Friend informed.

**Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab) [V]: I am afraid that “data not dates” clearly has not worked, because people have quite understandably just focused on the dates. The spring sunshine at the weekend meant that in lovely places such as Cambridge it was very busy. Are the Government now going to make a precautionary adjustment or, with hospital numbers still so high, take a chance and risk running the NHS into the ground?

**Matt Hancock:** No.

**Dr Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): Given that we believe in people taking responsibility for their own actions, will my right hon. Friend confirm that the refusal of a minority to accept vaccination is no reason to delay the lifting of restrictions on society as a whole?

**Matt Hancock:** That is an important point. We do not have mandatory vaccinations in this country. We do encourage as much uptake as possible, but with the percentages for uptake well into the 90s among the groups who have been offered the vaccine, it is clear that we will be able to get very high levels of coverage and therefore lift restrictions. I hope will be able to lift restrictions on the basis of the dates in the timetable set out but, as per my answer earlier, we will also monitor the data on the impact between each one.

**Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab) [V]: Anita Barker, the headteacher of Scott Primary School in Bedford, is doing all she can to keep her school safe and open, but she knows that more can be done and wants her staff to be vaccinated. I understand the JCVI’s reasoning on priority, but we have already made a special case for schools. The success of the road map hinges on schools going back safely, so does the Secretary of State have the political will to do all that he can to prevent further school closures and recognise that that means vaccinating school staff as soon as possible?

**Matt Hancock:** I am very happy to ensure that, as much as possible, school staff are vaccinated whenever they possibly can be within the JCVI categorisations, but we have to follow the clinical advice on this, because there is no evidence of teachers being worse affected by covid than other professions. It is incumbent on us all to ensure that the message gets across that the prioritisation—the order of the queue, so to speak—is based on the best clinical advice as to how to save the most lives most quickly. I am sure that is something in which everybody wants to share.

**Chris Grayling** (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): I again congratulate my right hon. Friend on the 20 million milestone, which is fantastic achievement for everybody involved. May I probe him on the question of outdoor transmission? It has been quite clear in the past few days that the level of adherence to the rules has dropped in outdoor settings; has my right hon. Friend’s research shown that there is genuinely an issue around the transmission of the virus outdoors? Have we actually seen any significant incidents of widespread transmission in outdoor settings?

**Matt Hancock:** The clinical advice is that outdoors is safer than indoors—the likelihood of transmission outdoors is much lower—but that in crowded outdoor areas in particular it is not nil. Hence, the road map is based on opening up outdoors sooner, but people should still follow social distancing and, of course, follow the rules, which should mean that come the 29th of this month we are able to open up outdoors first.

**Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP) [V]: Scottish health protection teams are having to trace all the people who travelled on the plane to Aberdeen, and there must be similar risks and concerns in England, given the travel through London. Of course, there are no passenger lists for anyone who travelled on by train. Does the Secretary of State not therefore agree that it is a matter of urgency that his Government change policy to reduce the risk of importing further and more dangerous variants?

**Matt Hancock:** Since the six people under discussion with the variant of concern first found in Brazil travelled here, we have introduced further strengthening at the border—the hotel quarantine. I think the best approach would be a UK-wide one. I discussed that with my colleagues in the devolved Administrations and I look forward to a time when we are able to have an aligned policy.

**Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): The constituency data released by Public Health England last Friday showed that more than 30,000 people in Harrogate and Knaresborough had had their first dose of the vaccine. This fantastic local performance, alongside the stunning national performance, reflects the expertise, determination and teamwork of many people, and I put on record my gratitude to them. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that we are on track to give everyone their second dose of the vaccine within 12 weeks of the first?

**Matt Hancock:** Yes; we have the vaccines available, and local areas need to know that the vaccines will be delivered to them in order for them to meet their schedule commitments for those second jabs. The logistics of the second jab are slightly more complicated than the first, because we need to make sure that the right person gets the right vaccine on the right date. There is a huge amount of work under way as that programme starts—today being 12 weeks to the day since the vaccination programme as a whole started. May I put on the record my thanks to the team in Harrogate, who have done an amazing job vaccinating over 30,000 people—more than the national average, if my memory serves me correctly? I thank my hon. Friend for his leadership in Harrogate and for supporting the team there to make this happen.

**Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab) [V]: The roll-out of the vaccines by the NHS and the efficacy of the vaccines are to be celebrated, and I congratulate everybody involved. However, the UK has the highest mortality rate per capita of any major country. Given that the Government maintain that they have consistently followed expert scientific advice, how soon does the Secretary of State think we should review that scientific advice and the decisions of the Government that were based on it so that we can learn the lessons of the past year as soon as possible?

**Matt Hancock:** We are constantly learning—about the asymptomatic transmission of the virus, the way in which it mutates and what works effectively against it; and we update policy according to what we learn. That is the nature of science; it is about constantly learning as new facts come to bear. We do not wait until after a pandemic to learn; we learn all the way through it.

**Ruth Edwards** (Rushcliffe) (Con) [V]: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the pace of the vaccine roll-out, and welcome the good news about the sharp decline in hospital admissions and deaths among vaccinated groups. Does he agree that this provides real hope that we will be able to end social distancing, along with other restrictions, from 21 June?

**Matt Hancock:** Yes.

**Stella Creasy** (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: I know that the Secretary of State shares my concern that not every community is as confident as others about taking up the vaccine. That is why I know he will want to congratulate my local doctors, primary care networks and local church leaders in Walthamstow, who led a vaccine clinic last week in our community to help support the black and ethnic minority residents to take up the vaccine. He will also want to congratulate my doctors on being some of the highest performers in the country in terms of getting people to have their vaccine. Will he meet me to discuss what we can learn about this community-led approach to vaccination and how we can do more to help that outreach work bridge the gap between different communities in our country, so that nobody is left behind in this health challenge?

**Matt Hancock:** Yes; this is one of the hon. Lady's campaigns that we can all get behind. She is quite right to raise the work that is being done in Walthamstow, which is very impressive. I will arrange a meeting between her and the Minister for Covid Vaccine Deployment, my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), to see what we can learn and what we can replicate.

**Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): This morning I received an email from a lady who is extremely clinically vulnerable. For perfectly good medical reasons, she cannot receive a flu jab or a covid jab, so she is very concerned that she will not be able to leave her front door if we bring in covid passports. For reasons of civil liberties, will the Secretary of State make it absolutely clear that we are not interested in bringing in covid passports internally, but that they are useful for foreign travel? I say to the shadow Secretary of State that, with the benefit of hindsight, perhaps we should have introduced a hotel quarantine system much sooner. Will the Secretary

of State make it clear that he will resist the travel lobby? Will he be absolutely up-front and honest with people, and say that it is unwise to book summer holidays now because there may be these mutants and it is better to hold off? I think that people accept the Government being tough, as long as they are consistent, particularly on foreign travel.

**Matt Hancock:** I will address each of my right hon. Friend's questions in turn. The point about certification is important. While decisions on certification are being reviewed in a review led by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, it is clear that we will need to provide people with the ability to certify whether they have had the jab, and we will absolutely need to consider those who have a certified clinical reason why they cannot have the jab. That applies to a relatively small number of people, but it is an important consideration that will be taken forward as part of that work.

I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for expressing his views on the approach to international travel. Quarantine is required for everybody who arrives as a passenger to this country, as well as testing on day 2 and day 8. That means we have a robust procedure to ensure that cases cannot be brought into this country and then spread in the community.

**Mr Ben Bradshaw** (Exeter) (Lab) [V]: With covid rates in Devon now down to just 31 per 100,000 and with all the vulnerable groups due to have been vaccinated by the end of this month, what will be the justification for keeping my constituents locked down and local businesses closed through Easter and beyond because rates happen to be higher somewhere else?

**Matt Hancock:** We obviously had a tiered system over the autumn and one of the challenges we found was of people travelling from a part of the country where rates are higher to those where rates are lower. Therefore, while we do not rule out a localised approach to outbreaks, we will move down the road map as a nation across England.

**Sir Christopher Chope** (Christchurch) (Con): People understand figures more than percentages, so I ask my right hon. Friend: how many people in England have been admitted to hospital having already had a vaccine for at least three weeks? That figure will illustrate the risk assessments that people would like to be able to make in respect of this set of vaccines. In the same way that I have been told that flu vaccines are only 40% efficient, these seem to be at least 80% efficient, which is really good news.

**Matt Hancock:** I do not have those specific figures to hand, but the MHRA—the regulator—regularly publishes what are called adverse events when somebody still has a problem with coronavirus having had the vaccine or has a response to the vaccine, and I will ensure that the appropriate body, whether it is MHRA or Public Health England, publishes both the number and the percentage.

**Hywel Williams** (Arfon) (PC) [V]: The covid testing package reservation form for international travellers from red list countries into England requires proof of purchase of two covid-19 tests before they can travel on to England and Scotland. However, there is no reference

to Wales on the form. Will the Secretary of State assure me that that is an oversight that will be remedied immediately and that international travellers from England continuing on to Wales are indeed required to comply with the testing and quarantine rules?

**Matt Hancock:** Yes, all international passengers are required to comply with the rules. It is the first time I have heard of that particular issue. I will write to the hon. Gentleman to set out either why the system is done in that way or that it has been rectified, if that is what is needed.

**Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con):** The road map contains a chapter on building resilience to future pandemics, which I think we must be honest and say will not leave us alone for another 100 years. Therefore, with respect to the global network of zoonotic research hubs, as the Prime Minister wisely set out in his five-point plan at the UN last September, can we ensure that they build on the work of experienced virus hunters already out there such as the Global Health Network who have years of experience searching for unseen viruses that leap from animals to humans?

**Matt Hancock:** Yes. The proposed work, as set out by the Prime Minister at the UN General Assembly, which we are working on with our presidency of the G7, aims precisely to build on and strengthen the existing work that is under way. However, clearly we need to ensure that all the future risks, whether they are from zoonotic diseases or are due to environmental changes that lead to risks to human health, are taken into account and we need to have an early warning system that is as effective as possible.

**Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD) [V]:** This very afternoon, I am going to get a jag—a “jag” is a Scottish term for a vaccination, not a posh car. Getting the maximum number of people in the highlands vaccinated as fast as possible is crucial to the reopening of businesses in my constituency, including those in hospitality and tourism. Will the Secretary of State give the maximum encouragement to the Scottish Government to make sure that that happens?

**Matt Hancock:** The vaccination programme is a successful UK-wide programme. We work very closely with the Scottish NHS and indeed the Scottish Government to make sure that right across all these islands we have the vaccination available fairly, according to clinical need, as fast as we possibly can. We can deliver this because we are one United Kingdom, with the buying power and scientific capability that comes from being one United Kingdom, all working together; this simply would not be possible if there were the separation that some propose. I will do everything I can to ensure that businesses and residents in Scotland get the protection from the jab that they deserve at an equal pace to everywhere else in this country. It is a crucial part of getting all of us on the road to recovery.

**Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con):** In order that we get and keep herd immunity, is my right hon. Friend planning any hard-hitting public information campaigns to ensure that younger adults take up the vaccine with the level of enthusiasm that my relatively elderly constituents have done?

**Matt Hancock:** Yes, we are absolutely planning to instil as much enthusiasm as we can muster among younger people, as we have seen among older people. The message to anybody who is younger is that getting a jab helps to set us all free and back on the road to recovery. It helps protect them, including from long covid, which can be a debilitating condition, and all of us. It is the right thing to do.

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** I thank the Secretary of State for an incredible, record-breaking vaccine roll-out, with which we are all incredibly impressed. Given the wonderful results showing that even one vaccination dose reduces the chance of hospital admission by 80%, will he outline the rationale for not vaccinating all workers in frontline services? At present, a 61-year-old writer who is able to work from home will receive a vaccination before a 59-year-old shop worker who is face to face with hundreds of different people each day. Should the Secretary of State and the Government not consider those thousands of frontline workers, who have made the continuation of life possible during these difficult times?

**Matt Hancock:** We did consider this question and asked our clinical advisers, the JCVI, to look into it. It found that notwithstanding the different risks that different occupations face, the overriding determinant of risk is age. Therefore, we are proceeding on the basis of that advice across the UK.

**Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con) [V]:** More than 40% of the adult population of my constituency have now received a vaccination, which is a truly magnificent effort, but across Kirklees there was an uptick in covid cases last week. What message can the Health Secretary send to my constituents so that we can stay on track with the road map out of lockdown?

**Matt Hancock:** I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for asking that question because we have seen, in a minority of areas, a small increase in the number of cases and that does include Kirklees. We have seen this in just under one in five local authority areas. My message to everybody in Kirklees is that this is not over yet. We have a road map out but it is not a road map for Government alone; it is a road map for all of us to walk down together. That means following the rules, and that means, for now, staying at home, but by doing that, we can all then move on the dates that are set out, and instead of “not before” dates they will become the dates that we can make the next step. But it is on all of us, and so I would urge everybody to continue. I know it has been a difficult winter and the sun is starting to shine a bit brighter, but we must all stick at this. We can see the way out and I hope that we can get there together.

**Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab) [V]:** Over 3,000 clinically vulnerable people in cohort 6 are going to have their vaccinations cancelled in St Helens at the end of this week, unless the required supplies are delivered by Thursday lunchtime. The vaccine site is serving four primary care networks, yet the national supply team is only recognising and supplying one network. The mutual aid gathered to cover this shortfall in the past is no longer available. Will the Secretary of State please urgently intervene to address this misunderstanding so that no vaccinations are cancelled?

**Matt Hancock:** I will absolutely ensure that the Minister for Vaccine Roll-out gets in contact directly with the hon. Lady. This is a massive effort, so there may be logistical challenges. We will look at and understand what the situation is in St Helens. As I have some family in St Helens, I am pretty keen to make sure this gets sorted ASAP. But it just shows that it is not easy to do this. The team are working incredibly hard all the time to resolve issues like the one that she rightly raised to make sure that this can go as smoothly as possible.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and suspend the House for three minutes to make the necessary arrangements for the next business.

2.17 pm

*Sitting suspended.*

2.20 pm

*On resuming—*

### **BILL PRESENTED**

#### **ADVANCED RESEARCH AND INVENTION AGENCY BILL**

*Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Secretary Kwarteng, supported by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Matt Hancock, Secretary Oliver Dowden, Secretary Ben Wallace, Secretary Grant Shapps, and Amanda Solloway, presented a Bill to make provision for and in connection with the establishment of the Advanced Research and Invention Agency.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 264) with explanatory notes (Bill 264-EN).*

### **Banking Services (Post Offices)**

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

2.20 pm

**Duncan Baker** (North Norfolk) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to place a duty on major high street banks to provide banking services in post offices; to make associated provision about access to post office services, including for elderly and vulnerable people; and for connected purposes.

I should declare at the outset that, prior to my election, in a former life, I was once a sub-postmaster.

Since 1988, some 14,000 bank branches have closed on our high streets, and next year there will be fewer than 6,000 left. Shareholder return is all that drives them. Shutting branches and getting rid of cost has happened for over 20 years. Where has the care gone for our communities that matter the most? Not everyone can go online when the bank branch shuts. What if they are elderly, vulnerable, do not drive or live on a poor bus route to visit the nearest alternative? I want to be a champion for our high streets and for our elderly and vulnerable, because they matter and it is about time we did something about this.

My Banking Services (Post Offices) Bill is about common sense. It will strengthen the current banking framework to ensure that local communities always have access to the banking services they need to function on the high street. That will be facilitated by the introduction of a mandated agreement to provide a minimum level of banking service through a suitable alternative, ensuring that customers are able to access vital banking services in their local area.

That is necessary because this trend is increasing. Between 2010 and 2018, about 5,000 bank and building society branches in England closed, at a rate of almost two every day, with four times more closed in deprived communities than in wealthy areas. Sadly, it is likely that those figures will continue to rise. The pandemic has already accelerated bank closures, with more closure programmes announced.

Inevitably, banks will promote digital banking as the way forward in a post-covid-19 world. However, those who cannot use online banking, whether that is due to personal choice or other issues that make it hard to use digital services, must not be forgotten. It is understandable that banks need to make decisions that keep their businesses operational, but where is the corporate social responsibility? Who was it that rescued the banks during the banking crisis? It was UK taxpayers—the very ones who now suffer when the banks close.

We should further worry because, as banks continue to pull out of economically distressed areas, they are often replaced with more predatory forms of financial institutions, leaving vulnerable people at further risk. If people cannot access banking services, how many will turn to payday lenders? We know that vulnerable people are twice as likely to have used high-cost credit because of the lack of alternatives.

What are those alternatives? The totally inconvenient solution where the next nearest branch is miles away, or online services. That is not good enough. It may be a cheaper option to the banks, but it comes at a greater cost to the most vulnerable in society, who cannot

always travel or use digital or phone services, and do not have the support they need to adapt when this type of change occurs. What about our local residents, the small businesses that rely on the banks, or the employees who face losing their jobs—many do, year after year—when banks close and leave town? We have a duty to find an alternative. The Bill will provide the safety net, that insurance policy, and a real alternative to the harsh reality that many face when banks make the decision to close a branch. It will safeguard that other authorised financial institutions will always provide the facilities needed and ensure that no one is left behind.

The reality is that the Government do not need to think too long or hard about where to start. They are the only shareholder in the organisation that can solve the crisis: our post offices. They are loved up and down the country, and in many of our towns and villages they are the beating heart of our local communities. Sub-postmasters provide an invaluable service. The network is 11,500 strong and its dedication was brought to the fore during the pandemic. As much as 90% of the post office network remained open during the lockdown, providing essential services to their communities. The facts speak for themselves: 99%—yes, 99%—of UK residents are situated within three miles of their local post office.

Post offices already provide an important social good. They support members of society by providing banking services in otherwise unserved locations. Indeed, a survey of 500 sub-postmasters found that they act as an informal and unpaid support mechanism for about 300,000 vulnerable people across the UK, and 88% already guide vulnerable customers through banking, bill payments and transactions almost every day of the week. The Government have the answer: invest further in our post office network, expand its footprint and reach, and let it be the vital provider of banking services.

Why do we need the Bill? Because we want this to be legally binding. We do not want what happened in 2019 to happen again. We want safety and security for communities up and down the land. In 2019, Barclays announced that it was to pull out of offering cash withdrawals from the post office network. There was public uproar, which made it reverse that decision, and rightly so, considering the impact that it would have had on the people who rely on that service. The problem is: what is to stop it happening again—Barclays and others walking away, leaving their communities high and dry? Imagine the impact of your bank branch being closed and, just when you think that the post office can cover your basic banking provision, a couple of years down the line that service is withdrawn too.

There needs to be a formal guarantee and certainty that that cannot ever happen again. Banks need to be formally regulated to offer a range of services through the post office network. The Financial Conduct Authority must regulate the arrangements between banks and post offices so that minimum guaranteed services are compulsory. It must not be up to the banks to be able to walk away and leave communities without any provision. We do not want a fragile agreement—not some sort of lovers' embrace, as we have now. We want it bound in law to protect these vital services for our communities. We know that the post office network already generates more than 400 million customer visits to neighbouring businesses, which equates to more than £1 billion to

local economies. That further shows the importance of post offices to people up and down the length and breadth of the UK.

Strengthening the banking framework could also help the Government deal with issues relating to access to cash, as it would provide a secure way for local communities to access the cash they need. The UK is not ready to go cashless. Annual volumes of cash withdrawals have grown by 46%, to nearly £8 billion, since the start of the banking framework. More than 5 million adults would struggle to go cashless. Indeed, we already withdraw up to £1,500 a year.

Put simply, cash is vitally important in society, and it must be for many years to come. This Bill is the answer. Banking services must always be guaranteed on the high street. They must not be put at risk. This Bill is supported by the Post Office, the National Federation of SubPostmasters and many other Back-Bench MPs. It provides the safety and the reassurance that our communities need, with proper mandated legislation that ensures our day-to-day banking is always provided by the post office branch network.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Ordered.*

That Duncan Baker, Sir David Evennett, Sir Graham Brady, Sir John Hayes, Jeremy Hunt, Alan Brown, Marion Fellows, Esther McVey, Robert Halfon, Mr Steve Baker, Kevin Hollinrake and George Freeman present the Bill.

Duncan Baker accordingly presented the Bill.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 265).*

## Business without Debate

### DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

#### POLICE

That the draft Police and Crime Commissioner Elections (Welsh Forms) Order 2021, which was laid before this House on 1 February, be approved.—(*Tom Pursglove.*)

*Question agreed to.*

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

#### LOCAL GOVERNMENT

That the draft Mayoral and Police and Crime Commissioner Elections (Coronavirus, Nomination of Candidates) (Amendment) Order 2021, which was laid before this House on 8 February, be approved.—(*Tom Pursglove.*)

*Question agreed to.*

### ESTIMATES: LIAISON COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATION

*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 145(3)),*

That this House agrees with the Report of the Liaison Committee of 1 March 2021:

That a day not later than 18 March 2021 be allotted for the consideration of the following Estimates for financial year 2020-21: The spending of the Cabinet Office insofar as it relates to the

26th Conference of Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP26); and the spending of the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and support for the DCMS Sectors during the Covid-19 recovery.—(Tom Pursglove.)

*Question agreed to.*

## Social Security

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** With the leave of the House, we will debate motions 5 and 6 on social security together.

2.32 pm

**The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Justin Tomlinson):** I beg to move,

That the draft Pneumoconiosis etc. (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations 2021, which were laid before this House on 14 January, be approved.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** With this we shall consider the following motion:

That the draft Mesothelioma Lump Sum Payments (Conditions and Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations 2021, which were laid before this House on 14 January, be approved.

**Justin Tomlinson:** These statutory instruments will increase the value of lump sum awards payable under the Pneumoconiosis etc. (Workers' Compensation) Act 1979 and the diffuse mesothelioma scheme established by the Child Maintenance and Other Payments Act 2008. As many hon. Members will know, these two schemes stand apart from the main social security benefits uprating procedure. While there is no statutory requirement to increase rates, I am happy to maintain the position and increase the amounts payable by the September 2020 consumer price index of 0.5%. This is the same rate that is being applied to industrial injuries, disablement benefits and other disability benefits under the main social security uprating provisions. These new amounts will be paid to those who satisfy all the conditions of entitlement for the first time on or after 1 April 2021.

The Government recognise the great suffering of individuals and their families caused by the serious and often fatal diseases resulting from exposure to asbestos or other listed agents. The individuals affected and their families may be unable to bring a successful claim for civil damages in relation to their disease. This is mainly due to the long latency period of their condition, but they can still claim compensation through these schemes. These schemes also aim, where possible, to ensure that sufferers receive compensation in their lifetime, without first having to await the outcome of civil litigation. While improvements in health and safety procedures have restricted the use of asbestos and provided a safe environment for its handling, the legacy of its use is still with us. That is why we are ensuring that financial compensation from these schemes is available to those affected.

I will briefly summarise the specific purpose of the two compensation schemes. The Pneumoconiosis etc. (Workers' Compensation) Act 1979, which for simplicity I will refer to as the 1979 Act scheme, provides a lump sum compensation payment to individuals who have one of five dust-related respiratory diseases covered by the scheme who are unable to claim damages from employers and who have not brought any action against another party for damages. The five diseases covered by the 1979 Act scheme are: diffuse mesothelioma; bilateral diffuse pleural thickening; pneumoconiosis; byssinosis; and primary carcinoma of the lung if accompanied by asbestosis or bilateral diffuse pleural thickening.

The 2008 mesothelioma lump sum payment scheme, which I will refer to as the 2008 scheme, was introduced to provide compensation to people who contracted

diffuse mesothelioma but were unable to claim compensation under the 1979 Act because, for example, they were self-employed or their exposure to asbestos was not due to their work. The 2008 scheme allows payments to be made quickly to people with diffuse mesothelioma at their time of greatest need. Under each scheme, a claim can be made by a dependant if the person with the disease has died before being able to make a claim.

The rates payable under the 1979 Act scheme are based on the level of disablement assessment and the age of the sufferer at the time the disease is diagnosed. The highest amounts are made to those diagnosed at an early age and with the highest level of disablement. All payments for diffuse mesothelioma under the 1979 Act scheme are automatically made at the 100% disablement rate, the highest rate of payment, reflecting the serious nature of the disease. Similarly, all payments for this condition under the 2008 scheme are made at the 100% disablement rate and based on age, with the highest payments going to the youngest people with the disease. In the last full year for which data is available, April 2019 to March 2020, 3,220 awards were paid under the 1979 Act, totalling £42.7 million, and 450 people received payments under the 2008 scheme, totalling £9.7 million. Overall, 3,670 awards were made across both schemes in 2019-20 and expenditure was £52.4 million.

I am keen to address the impacts of the covid-19 pandemic on sufferers of pneumoconiosis and mesothelioma. While this uprating debate is an annual event, this has been far from a normal year. We took the difficult decision at the outset of the pandemic to temporarily suspend all face-to-face health and disability assessments, including for the industrial injuries disablement benefit to protect the health of claimants and staff. We have continued, where possible, to process and qualify under SRTI rules—special rules for terminal illness—where a claim can be processed through paper-based review, and have recently explored telephone and video options in line with wider disability benefits to start to clear the backlog.

We are committed to working with our agencies and arms-length bodies to improve the lives of those people with respiratory diseases. People suffering from occupational lung diseases are likely to face a higher risk of complications resulting from covid-19 and it continues to be a distressing time for sufferers of the diseases we discuss today. As of Sunday 14 February, all those identified as clinically extremely vulnerable have been offered a vaccine.

Returning to these important regulations, I am sure we all agree that while no amount of money can ever compensate individuals and families for the suffering and loss caused by diffuse mesothelioma and other dust-related diseases covered by the 1979 Act scheme, those who have them rightly deserve the financial compensation that these schemes can offer. I am required to confirm that the provisions are compatible with the European convention on human rights and I am happy to do so. I commend the increase of the payment scales for those schemes and ask approval to implement them.

2.39 pm

**Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab) [V]: I thank the Minister for introducing these regulations and I am grateful for the opportunity to be able to respond virtually. As the Minister noted, these schemes

stand apart from the main social security benefits uprating procedure and there is no statutory requirement to increase rates. It is right that the Government will increase the amounts payable from 1 April 2021 in line with the September consumer price index figure of 0.5%, and, as in previous years, my Labour colleagues and I will support the increase.

I know that many Members of this House will be aware of the impact that these awful diseases can have on victims and their families. I am sure that they will want to join me in paying tribute to organisations such as Mesothelioma UK, the British Lung Foundation and Macmillan Cancer Support, which provide ongoing support and information.

The Health and Safety Executive estimates that 12,000 deaths each year are linked to occupational lung disease. Mesothelioma is a type of cancer that is almost always linked to asbestos exposure and most commonly affects the lining of the lungs. According to NHS website statistics, more than 2,600 people are diagnosed with this condition each year in the UK. Most of those diagnosed are aged between 60 and 80, and men are more commonly affected than women. Sadly, it is rarely possible to cure this disease, but treatment can help to control the symptoms.

Before the dangers were known, asbestos was frequently used for insulation, roofing and flooring in commercial buildings and homes. Its use was banned under the Asbestos (Prohibitions) (Amendment) Regulations 1999. Buildings constructed before 2000 may still have asbestos in them. Many colleagues will be aware that, unfortunately, those who worked in industries such as building and construction, particularly from the '70s to the '90s, may therefore have been exposed to asbestos. It can take many years for mesothelioma to develop, between exposure to the hazardous material and the onset of symptoms.

The term pneumoconiosis refers to a group of lung diseases caused by the inhalation and retention in the lungs of dust. People working in construction, quarrying, mining, pottery, sandblasting, ceramics and glass manufacturing are most at risk. As with mesothelioma, there is a long delay between exposure and the onset of disease, so most new cases or deaths reflect past working conditions and occur in individuals who have retired. Although both diseases are usually caused by employment conditions, sufferers are often not able to pursue claims for civil damages because of their long latency.

At last year's Committee on the uprating of these payments, my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) raised, as others had before her, the question of why this does not happen automatically. In response, the Minister stated that there would be "no monetary gain" in automatic uprating because benefit payments are already

"uprated... in line with CPI every year."

He also noted:

"These debates provide a valuable avenue for Members to discuss their thoughts on the lump sum schemes and, more broadly, on support for people with respiratory disease".—[*Official Report, Fifth Delegated Legislation Committee*, 25 February 2020; c. 8.]

While I agree with the latter point, I suspect that many sufferers and campaigners would prefer to have the security of knowing that the uprating will happen every year without fail. I further note that the Minister promised to keep this under review. I would be grateful if he clarified his current position on this.

[Vicky Foxcroft]

We also continue to have concerns about the huge discrepancy between lump sum payments made to victims and those made to their dependants. For example, a qualifying individual suffering from mesothelioma who was aged 60 at the time of diagnosis would currently receive £44,092. Payments to dependants, however, are significantly lower, and a dependant of someone who died aged 60 could currently receive £19,087. In response to a written question tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) in January last year, the Minister stated:

“It is right that available funding is prioritised where it is needed most, that is to people living with these diseases.”

I ask him again today whether he thinks that this is a fair level of compensation, given that these conditions were caused by individuals’ working environments and a substance that has since been banned.

We also cannot ignore the fact that this disparity is more likely to impact on women. Only 12% of the 2,025 new cases of mesothelioma assessed for industrial injuries disablement benefit in 2019 were female. That gives us a good indication of the gender imbalance. I am keen to know what assessment the Government have made of the impact of this lack of parity in payments on women in particular.

I also ask the Minister to share the most recent estimated cost of providing equal payments for sufferers and their dependants. I am aware that, as with automatic uprating, this issue has been raised annually by my predecessors and other Members. Does the Minister agree that this is rather telling? In 2010, the then Labour Minister, Lord McKenzie of Luton, pledged to equalise payments, yet here we are, 11 years on, still asking the Government do the right thing. Once again, I urge the Minister to reflect on this.

I will finish with two points that may not fall within the scope of this legislation but are nevertheless important to put on record. The first is on funding for treatment and research. As we know, cures for this condition are sadly lacking. Will the Minister and his colleagues at the Department of Health and Social Care consider additional funding for research into the increasing number of treatment options available? I know that many will also be keen to know what action the Government are taking to raise awareness of these conditions, their causes and the support available. That feels particularly important during the pandemic, given that victims of these diseases have been at increased risk for the past year.

My second point is on funding for the Health and Safety Executive, with which responsibility for asbestos primarily lies. Under successive Conservative Governments, funding for the HSE has been cut by £144 million in real terms. Although the Government announced £14 million in extra funding in May 2020, that is a drop in the ocean. What discussions has the Minister had with colleagues about the impact that these cuts have had on the HSE’s ability to regulate, monitor and take proactive action to prevent work-related injury and ill health?

While we are very happy to support today’s uprating of these lump sum payments in line with inflation, I hope I have made it clear that we continue to have a number of unresolved concerns. I would welcome further commitments from the Minister to look again at the equalisation and automatic uprating of these payments in future years.

2.47 pm

**Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP) [V]: As someone who has spoken on these statutory instruments before, I want to start, as I always have, by remembering my Unison comrade and friend Tom Begley, who sadly died as a result of asbestos-related cancer. Today I want to remember him and the others who have succumbed to these pernicious industrial diseases. I also want to pay tribute to and recognise the work of campaigners, trade unions and charities such as Clydeside Action on Asbestos in highlighting the devastating impact that these industrial diseases have on victims and their families.

There is a big problem in ensuring that people who are at risk are identified and diagnosed as soon as possible—not just those who have worked in factories and buildings but those who, for example, contracted these diseases as a result of washing clothes with asbestos on. It was SNP MPs in the 1970s who warned of the dangers of asbestos and industrial diseases. At that time, they were accused of scaremongering, but thankfully we have come a long way since then in recognising the dangers of asbestos and its impact on people’s health. We should recognise that one of the difficulties people have in pursuing civil claims is that many businesses are no longer trading.

I have a number of points and questions for the Minister. First, we welcome today’s uprating. We could quibble about whether the consumer prices index or the retail price index is appropriate, but I suggest that that is for another time. The Minister has said that the Government are under no obligation to increase the payments, but will he please give us a commitment and an indication that it is Government policy to uprate these particular benefits annually? I think the whole House would welcome that, and I hope that he is in a position to do so.

Secondly, as we heard from the Labour Front Bencher—I totally agree—the Government committed in 2010 to addressing the disparity between payments to sufferers and to dependants. That indicates that an equality impact assessment should have been carried out on the benefits, so I hope that the Minister can update the House in response not only to the shadow spokesperson but to me on what progress has been made in addressing the disparity.

Thirdly, given that the Health and Safety Executive comes under the control and purview of the Department for Work and Pensions, will the Minister indicate what help and support HSE is being given to ensure asbestos-free workplaces? What work is being done between his Department and HSE on awareness of asbestos and industrial diseases? It is vital to continue to raise awareness of the risks.

These payments are vital to sufferers of industrial diseases, so the SNP will support the statutory instruments today, with the caveats that I have outlined. I look forward to the Minister’s response.

2.51 pm

**Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab) [V]: I too welcome the fact that the Government are increasing the value of compensation in line with inflation, even though they are not required to do so. I want to press the Minister on the problems that sufferers of asbestos-related diseases

have had while waiting for an assessment for industrial injuries disablement benefit, and I am grateful to him for touching on that point in his opening remarks.

Lots of people suffering from asbestos-related diseases receive IIDB, but eligibility under the provisions we are debating is dependent on whether the applicant has had an IIDB assessment. The Department for Work and Pensions has made the point—the Minister reiterated it today—that the nature of the assessments means that they cannot be carried out remotely. Following the Department's decision to suspend face-to-face assessments during the pandemic, many claims have been delayed.

The Minister told the Select Committee that the backlog of IIDB claims had increased from a little over 2,000 in March last year up to 5,300 in November, and that the average age of each claim was 116 days. I wonder whether the Minister can update us on those figures. What is the current size of that backlog and the average age of claims? The Minister also told the Committee that the Department has started conducting paper-based assessments for some IIDB claims, and he mentioned that again this afternoon. I wonder whether he can tell us a bit more about how many have been completed, and what the impact has been on the size of the backlog.

The value of a claim for IIDB is reduced with the age of a claimant. There is a sliding scale up to the age of 77, and along that scale payments are reduced as a person gets older. The Minister has given an assurance that awards will be backdated to the date of the claim rather than the date of the determination to ensure that people whose claims were delayed do not have their award reduced. We asked the Secretary of State about that when she gave evidence last month, and the Committee heard from people whose compensation is still reflecting their age at the date of award, rather than at the date of the claim. The permanent secretary acknowledged at a meeting alongside the Secretary of State that at the moment

“the link to age applies to the point where the condition is assessed as opposed to the date of the claim.”

That is a problem.

Let me give one concrete example that was brought to our attention by the asbestos victims support group forum. The Greater Manchester support group helped a 71-year-old man with diffuse pleural thickening to apply for industrial injuries disablement benefit plus a 1979 Act payment. It helped him to make his claim on 21 January last year, but he was not awarded IIDB until 11 November, following a paper-based assessment. In the meantime he had turned 72, so his 1979 Act payment was £5,010, rather than £5,190. He lost £180 because no consideration was made for delays due to the pandemic. The support group makes a perfectly reasonable point:

“We believe it is unjust that victims of asbestosis and pleural thickening are further disadvantaged, having had to wait a considerable length of time for a procedure to be even put in place.”

In another example, a claimant whose date of birth is 2 July 1950 was visited by officials on 31 January 2020, so his application was made when he was 69. However, his workers compensation award letter was not issued until last December. It states his age at determination as 70—correctly, as that is how old he was by then—which entitled him to £5,378. If he had been paid before his birthday on 2 July, six months after he was visited and made his claim, he would have received £5,557. He has missed out on £179.

The Minister has made it clear that he does not intend claimants to suffer that penalty. In those cases, and others like them, what steps will be taken to put things right? How will the Department ensure that all claimants receive the correct amount of compensation, based on their age when they made their claim, rather than when their claim was determined?

When giving evidence to the Work and Pensions Committee, the permanent secretary promised to write to us on those points, but we have not yet had such a letter. The asbestos victims support groups forum confirmed this morning that it has had

“no information about what can be done for those victims who have lost out on compensation under the Pneumoconiosis etc (Workers Compensation Scheme) Act due to the delays.”

With publication of the Prime Minister's road map out of lockdown, will the Minister confirm when he expects face-to-face IIDB assessments to resume? Has the Department found any solutions that would enable telephone-based assessments to take place instead? He mentioned those in his opening remarks. How long does he estimate that it will take to deal with the backlog that has arisen?

2.58 pm

**Martin Docherty-Hughes** (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP) [V]: These days we often talk about social media in denigrating terms, but we would sometimes do well to remind ourselves why it is a useful tool. I was reminded of this the other day when a picture popped up on my Twitter feed from West Dunbartonshire Council's arts and heritage account. It showed a gang of riveters from John Brown's shipyard, dated 1927. On the bottom left was my grandfather, Frances Logan, bunnet on, and wearing a pair of boots that in those days marked him out as a worker, but that these days would mark him out as a hipster. For someone in West Dunbartonshire a century ago, working usually meant Denny's shipyard at Dumbarton, or John Brown's shipyard in Clydebank. That is what it meant for my granddad, and what it meant for my 86-year-old father, who is a coppersmith.

Owing to our recent industrial history, Clydebank, with its former shipyards and its own former Turner and Newell asbestos cement factory, became the asbestos disease capital of Europe. It is a legacy that hangs over my constituency. The incredible achievements and ingenuity of those who came before is now marked by an anger that not enough has been done to support those who live with the legacy of long-term exposure to asbestos and other noxious chemicals that were part of the process of industry.

The fight for justice in my community has been led by Clydebank Asbestos Group. For almost 30 years, it has been fighting for the legacy of those who took such pride in their work, so that they may have dignity after it. Like other members of my party, I will be supporting these statutory instruments, because it is the least that we can do for those who continue to live with the physical effects of the conditions, and for their dependants and families who care for them. It is on behalf of those families and dependants that I have asked the Minister and the UK Government to make good on the commitments that they made as long ago as 2010 to bridge the gap between in-life and posthumous payments. It cannot be the case that the disadvantage suffered by those who were unable to gain suitable compensation during their lifetime should be visited on another generation.

[*Martin Docherty-Hughes*]

This is a commitment that the UK Government could honour and it would dovetail with the legislation passed by the Scottish Parliament to aid those with mesothelioma or pleural plaques. While the memories of those of us born in West Dunbartonshire may recede, we know that groups such as Clydebank Asbestos will be around for another 50 years if that is what it takes to make sure that these promises are kept. As long as I am in this place, too, I will not turn from the duty that I have as the son and grandson of shipyard workers to ensure that this Government do right by them.

3.1 pm

**Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD): It is a pleasure to follow the very powerful contribution of the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (*Martin Docherty-Hughes*). As a Greenockian myself, I certainly pay tribute to the heritage of the Clyde shipbuilders.

I am pleased to support today's motion, which would uprate the payments made to sufferers of mesothelioma and other asbestos-related diseases. Members have already spoken about the absolutely devastating impact of these terrible diseases on both the sufferers and their families. It is particularly sobering that *The Guardian* reported that, alongside Australia, the UK had the highest rates of mesothelioma in the world in 2019. According to the National Asbestos Helpline, 13 people in the UK die every day from conditions that were caused by exposure to asbestos. That is more than twice the number of people killed daily in road accidents.

It is important for us to reflect on the failure of this place, and across the country, to appreciate the dangers of asbestos. The link between asbestos and other related diseases was first established in the 1950s, but it took another 40 years for a UK-wide ban to be enforced. Despite the ban, asbestos is still all around us, and that is quite literally the case for the building that we are in right now, and also for other public buildings such as hospitals and schools.

The Health and Safety Executive plays a key role in such assessments, but, as other Members have highlighted, its funding has been slashed and the number of inspectors has dropped significantly, too. The HSE also plays an important role in research around these and other occupational-related diseases, and I urge the Minister to address that issue in his wind-up.

It is, of course, entirely right that these schemes are under discussion today to ensure that sufferers of asbestos-related illnesses are compensated. None the less, there is an outstanding issue regarding the equalisation of payments to dependants who make a claim after somebody who has had one of the illnesses has died. This is a question of fairness, which is, after all, why the schemes were established to begin with. Will the Minister set out whether further consideration has been given to the issue of equalisation?

We must also reflect on the level of uprating, which is in line with inflation and other disability benefits that have already been passed in this place. When the uprating statutory instrument came through the House, I spoke of the importance of ensuring that legacy benefits and also carer's allowance received additional uplifts, in line with the universal credit uplift, to reflect the impact that the pandemic has had disproportionately on these groups.

The same argument very much applies to the sufferers of asbestos-related illnesses and their families. Diagnoses such as these are incredibly difficult at any time for the person in question and their family. I can only imagine the incredible pain and trauma during a period such as this where restrictions mean being able to see only a very limited number of people. We must acknowledge just how difficult such diagnoses are for the person and for their family at all times, and especially over the past year, and it is right that support is there to reflect that. That will be particularly true for diseases such as mesothelioma, for which the life expectancy for sufferers is sadly very poor.

Early detection is incredibly important for occupational lung-related diseases, as it is for all such diseases and cancers. The national lockdowns will undoubtedly have had a huge impact on people coming forward with symptoms to get checked. I pay tribute to the fantastic work of my hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (*Tim Farron*) to make the case in this place for catching up with cancer, and to all the many charities and groups that have been making that argument, too. I urge the Government to bring forward further measures to ensure that we catch up with the national cancer backlog. One way that can be done is through proper investment in our healthcare service and cancer services. I hope the Chancellor will address the issue in the Budget tomorrow.

Finally, I note the work to support sufferers that the Minister outlined in his opening remarks, but ask him to address this point. On the uplift in the regulations, will he set out how he has taken into account the impact of covid-19 on people with mesothelioma and other asbestos-related diseases, in terms of not only the direct impact on health outcomes for sufferers in relation to covid-19—which is, after all, a respiratory virus—but the indirect impact caused by shielding, increased costs and fewer opportunities to get symptoms checked?

3.5 pm

**Beth Winter** (Cynon Valley) (Lab) [V]: Pneumoconiosis is a horrible disease. I come from a mining family—my father, grandfather and great uncles all worked underground—so I have witnessed the devastating effects of the illness at first hand. I have watched someone struggle and fight for every breath that they take, day after day, and I have seen the suffering in their eyes and in the eyes of their closest family as they watch helplessly. It is typical of a husband to say to his wife, “You make sure that they examine my lungs after I'm gone”—with the feeling of at least some relief that his wife would be looked after by the state after his death.

The death rate from pneumoconiosis in the UK is particularly high in Scotland, the north-west, the north-east and here in Wales—in the devolved nations and deprived communities that the Government talk of levelling-up. I support the 0.5% increase to the lump sum payments proposed in the statutory instrument, but it fails to address long-standing limitations of the scheme—notably, the lack of parity between lump sum payments made to sufferers and those made to dependants, most of whom are women. This disparity is often worth tens of thousands of pounds.

During the covid pandemic, a serious issue has arisen that the Government have failed to address: the rules relating to death certificates have been relaxed and

post-mortems are not being carried out, despite the wishes of family. Many who die with covid have no mention of pneumoconiosis or other industrial diseases on their death certificates, so their families do not qualify for the lump sum payments. They are also prevented from accessing a number of schemes designed for the families of miners who suffer from industrial illnesses. Families cannot get the closure of knowing what caused or contributed towards the death of their loved ones.

Covid is particularly lethal for those with pre-existing lung conditions. A recent study that analysed the relationship between respiratory health conditions and covid mortality found that of all the conditions studied, pneumoconiosis had the biggest impact on covid mortality rates. In my former mining community in Rhondda Cynon Taf, the death rate from covid is the third highest in the UK—indeed, covid mortality rates are markedly higher across former mining communities. According to recent research conducted by Sheffield Hallam University during 2020, the cumulative death rate in older industrial towns and the former coalfields was on average 30% above the UK average. Behind the statistics there are grieving families who should have been compensated for the death of their loved one. For many wives and families, the payments make the difference between just about existing and living without financial worries.

The statutory instrument does not address the difficulties in acquiring a post-mortem report and therefore fails to provide reassurance for many families. It is essential that the matter is revisited to ensure that all ex-miners have their lungs examined—often in accordance with their stated wishes while alive—and that any industrial diseases are recorded on the death certificates of all ex-miners so that their widows are able to claim the benefits to which they are entitled. I also urge the Government to do more to raise awareness of the risks of working in environments with asbestos and other airborne particles, and to fund properly the Health and Safety Executive, which has had its funding cut by £144 million in real terms since 2010.

3.9 pm

**Kim Johnson** (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab) [V]: I welcome the opportunity to speak in this important debate and recognise the thousands of Liverpool constituents affected by asbestos-related diseases. I would like to start by paying tribute to the fantastic work of the Merseyside Asbestos Victim Support Group, which has assisted thousands of victims in obtaining welfare benefits and civil compensation, as well as providing invaluable community support for victims and dependants of meso and other asbestos-related conditions.

I welcome this move to increase payments in line with inflation, and the uprating being applied to all disability benefits. However, while I welcome the fact that it has been regular practice to agree the uplift, we must make moves to ensure that the annual uprating of the schemes is placed on a statutory footing and that more is done to ensure parity of payments to dependants. Can the Minister tell us what the Government's latest estimate is of the cost of providing equal payments to dependants, at a time when covid has left cancer patients waiting longer for diagnoses, treatments and surgery as well as facing the heightened health risk of contracting the virus itself? The automatic uplift is especially welcome in this difficult context.

Coronavirus has revitalised our focus on occupational health hazards, and I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the incredible key workers who are continuing to lay their lives on the line every single day to keep our country running and to care for those in need, and especially to the thousands who have sadly paid the ultimate price. The pandemic has also highlighted the vital role of the Health and Safety Executive in keeping us safe at work. However, cuts over the last 10 years by the Tory Government have seen the number of health and safety inspectors drop by a third. Those cuts have left workers at risk in unsafe conditions.

Despite figures released by Public Health England last month showing that there had been 3,500 covid outbreaks in workplaces including offices, factories and construction sites since last July, the Government have defended their decision not to place covid in the highest risk category, and the HSE enforcement database has revealed that no covid-related prohibition notices have been issued since the pandemic broke out. A decade of devastating cuts has turned the Government's health and safety watchdog into a lapdog, and without better funding and increased enforcement, which can only come from placing coronavirus in the highest risk category, workers' lives will continue to be at risk.

The TUC has called covid

“the most serious workplace safety hazard in a generation”.

More than 10,000 workers have died from the virus and many others are now living with long-term health problems as a result of it, yet the Government have so far made an extra £14 million available to the HSE during the pandemic, which does not even begin to scratch the surface of the cuts of more than £100 million in the past decade. I want to take this opportunity to call on the Government to recognise the need to keep workers safe in their workplaces and to take significant steps to provide the HSE with the funding and powers it needs to keep our key workers safe as they work to keep us safe.

3.12 pm

**Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD) [V]: This is quite a difficult and personal debate for me today. I was brought up in that world capital of asbestos-related diseases that the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) so eloquently described. Indeed, my mum's name is one of the many—too many—on a memorial in Clydebank to those who have died of asbestos-related lung disease. She did not qualify for compensation under the scheme because, as well as the length of time the disease takes to emerge making it difficult to pursue a legal claim successfully, the many and diverse conditions triggered by asbestos can also create problems with linking it directly to the workplace. There is still much work to be done in that regard. It was years after the asbestos factory closed, and more than 30 years from the time when my mum had worked in the shipyard office, that she was diagnosed when her symptoms emerged. The conditions brought on by breathing in that dangerous substance are no respecters of time, and the toll and the impact that they have, both emotionally and physically, on the victims and their families is huge.

Like previous speakers, I would like to mention the work done over many years by Clydeside Action on Asbestos and others. I remember my mum remarking

[Christine Jardine]

on the irony—she thought it was actually quite a nice irony—that so many people who had worked together in the 1960s whom she had known in the John Brown shipyard and not seen for years were brought together in mutual support in a campaign to help one another. But for many of us—many of their dependants—that was tinged with a huge sadness, because these were people we had known as our parents, aunts, uncles and friends of the family, who had been young and vibrant, with lives ahead of them, but who now had been brought so devastatingly low by asbestos-related conditions.

We have heard about the legislation in 1979 and the first decade of this century, which has gone a long way to helping those victims of asbestos-related diseases, but we still have so much more to do in ensuring better workspaces and ensuring better compensation for those affected by these and so many other workplace-related injuries and illness. So I have no hesitation in supporting this motion.

3.15 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Since coming to the House in 2010, I have spoken on this issue on each and every occasion, and I wish to do so again today. I have spoken on it over the years because I have had constituents—other Members have said the same—both during the past 10 and a half or 11 years as a Member of Parliament and when I was a Member of the Legislative Assembly, who have been affected by or died as a result of pneumoconiosis and mesothelioma. These were people I knew personally, so I was very concerned about them. I was pleased that Government responded during that period of time to make sure that the moneys that were necessary were put in place. Some of those people have died, but those who are left still live with the severe health problems, including some who worked at Harland and Wolff, the shipbuilders in Belfast. Many of my constituents worked there over the years, and that is where they ended up having their health problems from. Harland and Wolff used to employ some 30,000 people at one time, which gives us an idea of the magnitude of the number of people who could be touched by this.

I wish to echo the points about the equalisation for relatives that were made by the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain), because I fully support that, as others have done. Perhaps the Minister might respond on that. I welcome the increase, but may I gently ask the Minister what rationale was behind the decision to uplift this by a mere 0.5% during a pandemic, when most homes, especially those with old people who are shielding, have been put under a large amount of pressure? Instead of being able to shop around for cheaper goods, those people have to do their orders online and to accept whatever products are available. Most of their purchases have increased by 0.5%.

As the Minister is aware, I know him as a compassionate, considerate and assiduous Minister. Does he not agree that these payments, made to the most vulnerable of people, in these most difficult of days, should see an uplift that is appropriate? I ask, even at this late stage, that this amount of reconsidered, taking into account the additional pressures on not simply those who are ill, but their entire households. Not only those who are suffering from mesothelioma, but their families collectively

are under health and financial pressure as never before seen in our lifetimes. Minister, I am not being churlish, far from it, but I would appreciate a response to the question: why an increase of only 0.5%?

3.18 pm

**Justin Tomlinson:** I thank hon. Members for their helpful contributions to this debate, which is a rare case of cross-party support. The debate was hugely enriched by the very personal stories and experiences that were shared, which highlight the importance of these annual uprating regulations. The Government recognise that these two schemes form an important part of the support available to people with dust-related diseases, and these draft regulations will ensure that the value of that support is maintained. I wish to echo the comments about the charities and organisations that both support claimants and families to secure a diagnose and provide ongoing support. This House recognises what an invaluable role they play for people in such challenging times.

Hon. Members raised a number of points, and I will try to cover the key ones. First, on the delays, due to covid we understandably had to suspend traditional face-to-face assessments. We have now been able to start with paper-based reviews and, as we have seen with wider disability benefits, we have looked to use telephone and video technology where possible. As quickly as we are allowed safely to return to face-to-face assessments, those for whom we have not been able to do a paper-based review or a telephone or video assessment will be a priority in this area.

The Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), asked for an update on stats. They are published quarterly, and those he quoted are the last published ones. We will share the stats as soon as they come forward. However, we absolutely understand the importance of getting the backdates cleared. He also mentioned the issue whereby, for some claims made under the 1979 Act, due to the suspension of face-to-face assessments the amount of compensation a claimant can receive is based on their age on the date the IIDB was awarded, not the date of the claim. The Department is actively considering what we can do for those claimants who, through no fault of their own, have received a reduced amount as a result of the delays. We acknowledge that, we are looking to address it, and I very much welcome the right hon. Gentleman highlighting the issue in a proactive, constructive spirit. We do get that.

I turn to the quirk of why this debate is held annually. It was set in place in 2004, and Ministers—including me—have done it each year. A change to make this measure part of the wider statutory uprating would require primary legislation. However, aside from requiring legislation to make the change, this is an opportunity for us to focus on the scheme and the wider support, and the quality and merit of the speeches today shows why we have the debate annually. As ever, these things are kept under review, but it is one of those situations where there are gains, and it is about whether a change is needed.

A number of hon. Members raised the principle of equalising the levels of payments made to dependents. I listened carefully to the concerns raised, but the Government remain of the view that available funding should be prioritised to those people who are currently living with the disease.

A number of hon. Members spoke about the importance of research, which is crucial, particularly in our fight against cancer. I very much welcome the fact that the Department of Health and Social Care invests £1 billion a year in health research through the National Institute for Health Research. We have been working actively for several years to stimulate an increase in the level of mesothelioma research, and I thank organisations such as Cancer Research UK, the British Lung Foundation and the Medical Research Council that are proactively trying to stimulate additional crucial research in that area. We will welcome any more work that is done.

A number of hon. Members addressed the HSE, which is a wonderful organisation. I welcome the fact that it secured an additional £14 million for the financial year 2021-22 to continue to support the Government in the national response to the global covid-19 pandemic. That will fund spot checks and inspections, including those enforced by local authorities, to ensure that workplaces are covid-secure for workers and the public. That is in addition to the HSE's regular Government funding to deliver its wide-ranging regulatory functions.

To be clear, the HSE does not only rely on direct Government funding; it also generates income. Rightly, a key part of its work is raising awareness, and its health and work strategy delivers a strategy for occupational lung disease that includes raising the profile of occupational lung diseases through activities such as facilitating the Healthy Lung Partnership to provide direction of co-ordinating stakeholder activity on occupational lung disease, in addition to targeted intervention activity. When I was responsible for the HSE as a DWP Minister—it is no longer part of my responsibilities—I was incredibly impressed with how well it engaged with businesses of all sizes to give them the best knowledge, support and guidance in all areas of health and safety, and that part of its work is crucial.

Moving on to the very important issue of cancer patients, it is imperative that people can get tested for cancer and that cancer patients continue to receive the treatment they need. While the covid-19 pandemic has

presented major challenges for all healthcare systems, overall cancer treatment services have been maintained throughout the pandemic. The NHS has published a cancer service recovery plan that aims to prioritise long-term plan commitments, including respiratory disease, as a clinical priority, and that will support recovery. This includes the delivery of targeted lung health checks and the roll-out of rapid diagnostic centres. As of the end of 2020, there were 53 live rapid diagnostic centre pathways across hospitals in England, compared with just 12 in March 2020, with a further 63 pathways in development. In October 2020, NHS England, NHS Improvement and Public Health England launched the latest “Help Us, Help You” campaign to urge people with potential symptoms of cancer to see their GP. The lung cancer campaign will focus on the key symptom of a cough for three weeks or more and encourage anyone who has had this symptom to speak to their GP. I am sure we would all echo the importance of that message.

On dependents and gender imbalance, we have not conducted an impact assessment, but a valid point has been raised and I will take it away to look at it.

I commend the uprating of the payment scales for these schemes and ask for approval to implement them.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That the draft Pneumoconiosis etc. (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations 2021, which were laid before this House on 14 January, be approved.

*Resolved,*

That the draft Mesothelioma Lump Sum Payments (Conditions and Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations 2021, which were laid before this House on 14 January, be approved.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I will now suspend the House for three minutes to make the necessary arrangements for the next business.

3.26 pm

*Sitting suspended.*

## Covid-19: Cultural and Entertainment Sectors

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** May I say what a great pleasure it is to see the hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) in her place?

3.29 pm

**The Minister for Digital and Culture (Caroline Dinenage):** I beg to move,

That this House has considered covid-19 and the cultural and entertainment sectors.

May I, too, extend a very warm welcome back to the hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens)? It is so lovely to see her back in her place looking so well.

I am so grateful for this opportunity to highlight the Government's support for our world-class culture and entertainment sectors during what has been an extremely challenging year. The UK has one of the strongest cultural sectors in the world and a really proud tradition of supporting the artists, entertainers and creatives who do so much to enrich our lives.

Experiencing culture, whether it is through visiting a museum, wandering through the gardens of a heritage site or attending the theatre, can do so much for our mental and physical health, and I know that so many of us have leaned on films, TV, virtual exhibitions and all other types of art and entertainment to get us through the last year. Covid-19 has placed unprecedented pressures on organisations and individuals across the economy, but entertainment and culture have been particularly hard hit, relying as they so often do on social interaction and close contact.

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** I spoke to the Minister beforehand. As she said, this pandemic has been greatly disheartening for the culture sectors. For example, Scottish dancing and Scottish piping are very important in my constituency, but the problem is that they do not have their own properties and they are not eligible for grants. It is essential that they have a restart grant to allow them to start again, and to allow our children to be active in such a wonderful way. What can the Minister do to make that happen?

**Caroline Dinenage:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to champion those small, local cultural establishments in our communities up and down the country that do so much to entertain us, but also to boost our wellbeing and our general sense of health. That is why, as part of the £1.57 billion culture recovery fund, the Barnett formula extended that funding to all the corners of our great nation. Indeed, the Northern Ireland Assembly saw £33 million, which of course it can choose to use how it wants to support all those wonderful cultural establishments that do so much for us.

Last week, the Prime Minister announced a very cautious but irreversible route out of lockdown, while also acknowledging that the threat from covid remains substantial. I recognise that, although this represents a turning point in the nation's battle against coronavirus, many of our sectors will be impacted by continued restrictions and, of course, will be understandably frustrated at being unable to fully reopen just yet.

However, there is hope on the horizon through the events research programme announced in the road map, which will explore how larger events across the cultural and entertainment sectors can begin to reopen safely. I recognise, of course, that businesses are so keen to reopen as soon as possible, but, as the Prime Minister said, it is vital to take a measured and careful approach so that it is truly a one-way road out of this pandemic.

The success of the vaccination programme has offered us the protection to very tentatively start removing the restrictions. There will be five-week intervals between each of the four steps, to enable the scientific data to be evaluated and to ensure that the next step is truly safe before we take it.

Under the road map, outdoor sport and leisure facilities will be able to reopen at the second part of step 1, no earlier than 29 March. At step 2, no earlier than 12 April, indoor leisure facilities such as gyms can reopen for use by people on their own or in household groups, as can most outdoor attractions and settings, including hospitality venues that are outdoors, zoos, theme parks and drive-in cinemas.

Step 3, no earlier than 17 May, will see indoor entertainment venues such as museums and cinemas reopening. The Government will also allow some larger performing and sporting events, in indoor venues with a capacity of 1,000 people or half-full, whichever is the lower number, and in outdoor venues with a capacity of 4,000 people or half-full, again whichever is the lower. In the largest outdoor seated venues, where crowds can spread out, up to 10,000 people will be able to attend, or a quarter full, whichever is the lower.

**Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP):** The Minister will be aware that many entertainers and venues across my constituency and every constituency have been absolutely decimated; their livelihoods have been taken off them. Does she agree that one way to deal with that is to have a creative approach to taxing creatives, as they do in the Republic of Ireland, where there is the artists' tax relief? The reduction in the VAT rate for ticket sales could be extended to help venues get through this very difficult period.

**Caroline Dinenage:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that the VAT reduction on hospitality and entertainment over the past year has been a great benefit for a lot of our venues. Of course, any announcements about that will be set out tomorrow by the Chancellor in his Budget, but it is an excellent point.

In step 4, no earlier than 21 June, our ambition is to reopen remaining premises. I am sure, Madam Deputy Speaker, that you will be delighted to know that that includes nightclubs. That will ease the restrictions on large events and performances that apply in step 3, subject to appropriate mitigations. However, it is important to stress, as the Prime Minister said, that the decision on each stage will be based on data and not dates. The Government will move cautiously to keep infection rates under control.

However, I know that for so many in the arts and entertainment sector, this proposal represents further months of financial uncertainty, so the Prime Minister provided assurance in his announcement last week that for the duration of the pandemic, the Government will continue to do whatever it takes to protect jobs and

livelihoods across the UK. We have been working very closely with the Treasury on this issue to determine the appropriate and most effective response for the sector within the public health context.

In the Budget tomorrow, the Chancellor will set out the next phase in our economic support package. It will reflect the steps set out in the Prime Minister's approach to easing the restrictions through the road maps. We now know that there will be good news for our sectors tomorrow. There will be a generous package of funding that is about not just survival but planning, preparing and paving the way to the reopening of our sectors. I look forward to hearing more detail from the Chancellor tomorrow, and I am sure hon. Ladies and Gentlemen across the House do too.

Our commitment to supporting individuals and businesses has been steadfast through this challenging period. The Government have supported individuals across the economy through financial packages such as the job retention scheme and the self-employed income support scheme. In particular, the £1.57 billion culture recovery fund—the single largest-ever support package for the arts—has helped to safeguard not only the future of some of the best-loved cultural and creative venues, but many of the jobs and livelihoods of the incredibly skilled people who depend on them. It has also assisted the supply chain organisations, which are recognised as a crucial part of the sector.

We have recognised the significant pressures faced by businesses in our sectors. The Chancellor announced one-off top-up grants for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses, worth up to £9,000 per property, to help businesses through the spring, and £594 million of discretionary funds was made available to support other impacted businesses, in addition to £1.1 billion of further discretionary grant funding for local authorities, local restriction support grants worth up to £3,000 a month and the extension of the furloughing scheme. Business rates relief and numerous loan schemes have provided certainty for businesses and have enabled planning, recruitment and job retention.

We are absolutely determined to make sure our cherished culture and heritage makes it through this crisis. That is why we have also provided sector-specific funding and support. We have worked closely with all our sectors to draft guidance to ensure that businesses are as covid-secure as possible and to protect workers and visitors. To date, £1 billion of the culture recovery fund has been allocated across all four nations of the UK, providing direct support to organisations, both large and small. As I have mentioned, the devolved Administrations have received £188 million through the Barnett formula. Of that £1 billion, £800 million has been awarded to more than 3,500 arts, culture and heritage organisations across England, which has helped to support at least 75,000 jobs.

With your indulgence, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to dig a bit deeper into those figures so that hon. Members get a real sense of where the funding has been directed and the kind of organisations that it has supported through an incredibly difficult year. Some 462 awards have been made to applicants whose main art form is theatre, with a value of £183 million. The sector will be further supported through the second round of funding. Some £79 million is being distributed between 514 heritage organisations, 96 grants of which—totalling £17.5 million—are to listed places of worship, and over 15% of funding is to listed historic housing

and gardens. We have supported museums, with £49 million being distributed to 156 organisations through Arts Council England *alo-ne*.

As a result of Government support and guidance—in particular, the film and TV restart scheme—the screen industry has bounced back and recorded the second highest production spend for any quarter on record. The combined total UK spend on film and high-end production was more than £2.8 billion—a drop of only 21% from the 2019 record. The £500 million film and TV production restart scheme has filled the insurance gap, giving productions the confidence to keep shooting and ensuring that family favourites such as “Ant & Dec's Saturday Night Takeaway” and “Midsomer Murders” continue to entertain us and lift our spirits—although perhaps the murders not so much. Such programmes have also created much needed employment opportunities.

Falling infection rates, the vaccination of more than 18 million people and scientific data about the efficacy of our hugely successful roll-out continue to give this country real grounds for optimism. The road map sets out a clear and cautious route to return to normality. Throughout the pandemic, though, protecting the public has been our top priority, and we will continue to work closely with our sectors to support them to reopen as soon as it is safe and sustainable to do so.

3.41 pm

**Jo Stevens** (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Madam Deputy Speaker, may I thank the other Madam Deputy Speaker and the Minister for their kind words? I also thank the very many Members and staff across the House who wished me well during my hospitalisation and recovery, and the wonderful NHS staff in Wales.

Let me turn to the business of the debate. It is the eve of the Budget, and it is right that we debate the severe problems facing one of the UK's most important economic sectors. Our cultural and entertainment sector is globally renowned and economically critical. It showcases innovation and creativity; develops specialist knowledge, skills and jobs; drives opportunity, significant inbound tourism and economic regeneration; and, as we know, improves our health and wellbeing. The Opposition believe that our cultural sector is integral to our national recovery from this crisis, and that it also has a key role to play in shaping the kind of society that we want to see in the future. But to do that, the jobs, skills and talent need to survive and be supported.

In the most recent Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport annual report, the Secretary of State talks about preserving our cultural heritage, but our culture is not something to be preserved in *aspic*. Instead, it is a sector that is built on people and their dynamic connections with one another. It is this misunderstanding that lies behind the lack of appropriate provision to support the brilliant professionals in the sector, hundreds of thousands of whom have fallen through the gaps because of the Chancellor's rigid criteria for support and his complete refusal, despite numerous requests, to provide financial help to those he has excluded and who have become known as “the excluded”. There are more than 3 million such people, and many of them are in the cultural sector.

During this fast-moving pandemic, there has been a great deal of sympathy for the Government having to react quickly to events, but we are almost a year on

[Jo Stevens]

from the first lockdown and the refusal to help people in the cultural sector can only be seen as a choice—a choice to ignore them for an entire year. We know from the decisions taken in Wales that it did not have to be that way. The Welsh Labour Government's freelancer fund has already supported thousands of freelancers in three phases of support.

The Opposition believe in fairness and equitable access to support during the pandemic and that no one should be excluded because they are engaged to work outside of permanent employment contracts. The rich patchwork of creative talent in this country is built on freelancers—people who work across different projects or genres, and it is that cross-pollination of ideas that makes it so rich. But because they do not fit the Chancellor's model, this Government have excluded them from support, even speaking about those in the cultural and creative sectors as if they were people exercising their hobbies rather than world-class skills.

Tomorrow, nearly a year after the start of the first lockdown, the Chancellor has another opportunity to right that wrong and level the playing field. We have heard today about the topping up of the pot for theatres, but people who work in theatres still do not know how long they can be furloughed for. Self-employed people have no idea what level their next grant will be. Freelancers have still been left out of support altogether, as I have described. The industry faces a VAT cliff edge at the end of the month, and none of that needed to wait until tomorrow's Budget: it should have been clarified by the Government weeks ago.

At least 55,000 culture jobs have already gone—nearly a third of the arts element of the workforce—and two thirds of people who have lost their jobs in this sector have already decided that they cannot risk returning to it, meaning that those skills and talents are lost to our economy. The Government should be going out of their way to save those jobs, but we have heard virtually nothing about those jobs from either DCMS or the Government as a whole. Is that indifference or incompetence? I know what the cultural sector's verdict is.

Last July, we welcomed the announcement of the culture recovery fund but, as I said at the time, it came too late for some people and organisations. The distribution of the fund was delayed, characterised by slowness when the need was immediate, and it has still not reached some of the places where it is required. The criteria are rigid, and its hallmark is to protect institutions rather than jobs. It could have been designed in a much better way, to provide protection for people's livelihoods, had there been a proper understanding by Government of the ecology of how employment works in this sector. The top-up announced in the press release last night still does not address those problems and it does not say when the money will be distributed.

I also hope that the Chancellor will tomorrow heed Labour's call to continue the VAT rate of 5% on tickets. That scheme could not be used by many in the cultural sector because the restrictions meant closure and, in the short periods outside lockdown, there simply was not enough time while open to be able to sell any tickets. We need to see an extension of the reduced rate, so that venues and festivals can start to benefit from the scheme and the public can be incentivised to buy tickets.

The VAT issue is another example of the Government's lack of understanding of the day-to-day realities of the pandemic for our cultural venues. That was never more apparent than in the run-up to last Christmas, when the Secretary of State was busy encouraging theatres to put on pantomimes, while at the same time knowing that the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies advice and data suggested that cases were rising to such an extent that theatres would inevitably have to close. Even the retired Conservative peer Lord Lloyd Webber spoke of his frustration with the incompetent handling of reopening dates.

The sector has been hugely sympathetic to the difficulties facing the Government, but that sympathy is now wearing thin. We see Ministers spending their time feigning concern for statues, rather than figuring out how this resilient and dynamic sector can be best supported through this crisis. The thinly veiled threats to museums and galleries and the attempts to bully independent cultural organisations packed with national expertise that rely on Government funding show where the Government's priorities for our cultural sector really lie. No matter that the sector was the fastest growing ahead of the pandemic, no matter that the role of arts and culture in social prescribing and education delivers huge returns on investment and no matter the potential for brand GB from our biggest exports—this Government's priority is stoking a culture war, rather than championing our world-class cultural sector. There are other problems of the Government's own making that the pandemic has masked. The broken promise on post-Brexit touring by performers has already been laid bare for its failures.

Labour strongly believes in the artistic and creative life of this country not only as a powerful driver of economic growth but as a part of who we are as a nation. There is a reason why so many people still talk about the 2012 Olympic opening ceremony as a great national moment. Not only did it display some of our finest talent; it allowed us to celebrate our history in all its complexities and contradictions, and to do so with a good dose of self-deprecation and some laughs at our own expense. But this Government do not get that. They do not get what it is to be British in the 21st century. They see the world in black and white and we know that this is not how many of us live. The fact is that our arts and culture allow us to examine that—to ask questions, to respectfully disagree, to challenge each other and to find common ground.

There is no doubt that the last year has been one of the hardest in living memory. The work of nurses, doctors, carers, scientists and many more people is rightly at the forefront of our minds when we think about recovery, but to me national recovery—our national recovery—is something greater and wider. This national trauma has caused a huge rupture in the fabric of everybody's lives. We have lost family, friends, colleagues. We have lost opportunities and missed out on key milestones of our lives. We have had to Zoom watch funerals, unable to properly say goodbye. We have had to send cards for weddings we would rather have travelled across the world to be at. We have all put things on hold. When we are safe and when we still need to grieve collectively, we will do that and move on together.

The cultural sector is not one that typically asks for Government support. Instead, a series of Conservative Governments have reduced public funding and made

many theatres and arts organisations radically change so that they rely solely on ticket sales and outside sponsorship. Therefore, when the pandemic hit, this left them utterly vulnerable. Tomorrow, the Chancellor needs to give our world-leading creatives the support they need to get on and create. Can I say this to him? That does not simply mean employing them to make his own promotional videos. It means addressing all those problems with the culture recovery fund and, specifically, a whole year on from when it should have been done, providing support for those whom the Government have deliberately excluded. Our cultural sector is not just a huge and vital part of our economy. For many people, it is what makes life worth living.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** It is very good to see the hon. Lady back at the Dispatch Box and fully back to health, and we all wish her well.

3.52 pm

**Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con) [V]:** It is sad but true that one of the hardest-hit parts of the economy has been the cultural and entertainment sectors. The creative industries contributed over £115 billion to the UK in 2019, equivalent to £315 million every day. The UK would have been in recession for each of the last three years without the creative industries' sectors. Until covid-19 hit, this was the fastest expanding part of the UK economy and it should be protected.

In my position as Chair of the Select Committee on Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, I have seen the damage that has been done to this industry by covid-19. As part of our current inquiry into the future of UK music festivals and live events, we have been examining not just how the industry can survive the current crisis, but how festivals and other live events can continue to grow and thrive sustainably as a key part of the UK's cultural offering in the years to come. I know that these concerns apply across the board to the cultural and entertainment sectors. For example, pre-covid the night-time economy contributed £66 billion per year to the UK and provided 1.3 million jobs.

At last, the end does now seem in sight. The Prime Minister's road map has set out dates that can now be a target for entertainers, producers and technical staff. However, even with this exciting news and the road map set out, the industry still needs more than ever a Government-backed insurance scheme. Despite how unpredictable the virus is, given the amazing vaccine roll-out, we have confidence that people will be able to gather in numbers, as we did once before. But we know that covid-19 will not go away easily. While there does remain a risk, however small, that dates could change and events, especially those of a larger scale, could again face cancellation, it is necessary that the industry has a support mechanism in place.

The cultural and entertainment sectors and all those who rely on them for work cannot risk losing a summer season for a second year in a row. They need the chance to be able to safely plan for the return of audiences. Germany has set in train a €2.5 billion guarantee fund, and Germany is nowhere near along the same road as we are with vaccinations. Last summer, my Committee recommended that the Government extend the 5% VAT rate on ticket sales until 2022. To benefit from the reduced rate, people must be able to sell tickets. Up to this point, events have not been happening to do that; it has been

impossible. The industry, which has had to shut down for most of the past 12 months, needs the time and support to be able to bounce back to the world-leading position it occupied before the pandemic. With light at the end of the tunnel and with the likely increase in staycations, the summer of 2021 looks as though it might be brighter than we hoped only a few months before, but we know we cannot let ourselves slip at this final hurdle. We have to support the industries in the Budget and beyond.

3.55 pm

**John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP) [V]:** I also welcome the hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) back to her place. It is very good to see her.

One year ago, the pandemic changed our world. Lockdown came and, as we found ourselves forced inside and away from our friends and families, many found comfort in the arts and culture. In the past year, every hon. and right hon. Member of this House will have, I am sure, searched for escape in a book, lifted their spirits with music, or distracted themselves with film. A world without literature, music or cinema would be intolerable and a lockdown without the arts would have been even grimmer than it has been.

As we continue to weather the crisis, culture still plays a significant role in getting us through the day. The artist has in many ways been an essential worker and one too often overlooked by the UK Government. One of the groups struggling with the impact of covid-19 is the freelance sector. A survey of Equity members found that 40% have not received help from the self-employed income support scheme. Various loopholes have left many out in the cold, unable, due to technicalities, to qualify for UK Government schemes.

That injustice has meant that many creative professionals have had to apply for universal credit, with many more considering leaving the culture sector altogether. In pre-covid times, the cultural and entertainment sector not only brought huge benefits to the economy, but gave the countries of the UK international acclaim. It is vital that we ensure that every one of those workers comes back into the industry, so that whenever the pandemic is over the sector thrives again. In the Budget tomorrow, the Chancellor must protect these essential workers and ensure that they no longer fall through the cracks. He must go further by guaranteeing them the backdated support they deserve.

Let us look at musicians as one key group. They are facing long-term worries about the viability of their industry. They are fighting on three fronts. In the last five years, the market for recorded music has shifted towards streaming. Opaque deals cut by the big record labels and the streaming model mean that most no longer have a viable stream of income from recording. The result is that they are almost completely reliant on live performance. Live performances in the Brexit age, a world of limitless opportunity—well, hardly, because the UK Government rejected the EU's proposed artists' deal. Musicians have now been landed with the very hardest of Brexits.

The Minister, appearing before the Select Committee, recently looked surprised to discover that a single one-night visa for a UK performer in Spain now costs €600. It is €500 in Italy. When covid lockdown ends, none but the wealthiest musicians will be able to perform across much of Europe. That means the end of orchestral tours.

[John Nicolson]

The Minister confirmed to us that no talks are ongoing to resolve this looming Brexit reality. Once again, jobs are being wilfully sacrificed for anti-free movement zealotry. The chaos visited on musicians impacts not just them but their support crews, technicians and haulage companies, all of whom will lose out on work to cheaper European alternatives. Put yourself in the shoes of one of these musicians, with no money coming in from record sales or European tours, the only saving grace being the upcoming domestic festival season—a season once again cancelled. The UK Government had the opportunity to underwrite insurance for festivals but decided not to. Glastonbury was one of the first to cancel. Musicians and their support staff did not get into this business for money but for a love of their craft. They have never asked for much from their Government, but they surely have the right to expect that their Government do not actively work against them.

Musicians, rightly, have received much publicity, but another sector that has been forgotten by the Government is advertising-funded media and entertainment. Local commercial radio stations have provided trustworthy news and a friendly voice for those living alone, but they have seen their revenues plummet. The drop in advertising revenue has also been a major problem for local papers. Some have had to shut their doors after decades of dedicated service to their community. That is why we on the SNP Benches backed a tax credit for the advertising-funded media sector, and I call again on the UK Government and the Chancellor, in particular, to listen and act.

In the time available, I cannot name-check every cultural and entertainment sector damaged by this pandemic and threatened by Brexit, crying out for help, but all are asking that this House hears one overriding message that is vital for their long-term recovery. Just because an industry limps on, it does not mean that the wounds dealt by the pandemic have healed. The Government must offer and maintain their support in the years to come.

The arts and culture communities the length and breadth of these islands eagerly await the Chancellor's Budget tomorrow. Artists deserve more from the UK Government and I hope that he has been listening and will deliver, but I am not holding my breath. Westminster seems very distant, remote and unresponsive to the sector's concerns.

The Canongate wall of the Scottish Parliament is covered with quotations from writers from across Scotland and from the length of its history. I will close with one of those quotes by Sir Walter Scott:

“When we had a king, and a chancellor, and parliament-men o’ our ain, we could aye pebble them wi’ stanes when they werena gude bairns—But naeboddy’s nails can reach the length o’ Lunnon.”  
Let us hope I am wrong.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** Although this is clearly on the Annunciator and the screens that people have in front of them, I reiterate that there will be a limit of three minutes on Back-Bench speeches.

4.2 pm

**Adam Holloway (Gravesham) (Con) [V]:** It is a great pleasure to see the hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) back in her place. There is no denying that the entertainment and culture sector has been one of the industries hit hardest by the pandemic and it has

been felt by businesses and individuals alike. Some people take the view that those who work in the media, film and TV earn huge salaries and are not in need of Government support, but that is very far from the truth. There is a huge number of people both on and off the screen who, before the pandemic, were earning very modest salaries with very little job security. I know that many have sought jobs in other sectors, which is the right thing to do, but with the hospitality industry almost completely closed, along with non-essential shops, there are few opportunities available to them.

While the Government's financial response to the pandemic has been very ambitious and far-reaching, on a global scale, there regrettably remains a very significant number of people who have been unable to make use of the support schemes. A large number of those are in the culture and entertainment sector and, in some cases, this is because they work via a limited company and cannot access self-employment grants, or, indeed, because they are employed on fixed-term pay-as-you-earn contracts. Many of my constituents who find themselves in this position have pointed out the disparity in Government support, given what someone who has been made redundant and someone who is on furlough will receive, especially when the worker who has been made redundant is not eligible for universal credit because of savings or home ownership, yet that will have no impact on his or her ability to be furloughed.

The aim of the Government has been to save as many jobs as possible with a finite supply of taxpayer funds. However, inevitably, everyone will have to play a part in paying off the debt, including those who did not receive any support. I know that the culture sector is anxious to know when it can reopen and I welcome the Prime Minister's road map, which sets out a gradual return to normality.

4.5 pm

**Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab) [V]:** I am proud to declare an interest—not a financial one, but a passionate one. I chair Theatre Royal Stratford East, the erstwhile home of Joan Littlewood renowned for “Oh, What a Lovely War!”, “Things Ain't What They Used To Be” and “A Taste of Honey”. I am immensely proud of our success in regaining our historic reputation for excellence and radicalism under the leadership of Nadia Fall, a hugely talented artistic director of Asian heritage, and her team of mainly women theatre makers.

We were on a roll, culminating in receiving an Olivier award for staging Britain's “Noye's Fludde”, which involved east end children performing alongside ENO singers. Our mission to create excellent shows and reflect the diversity of our community in everything that we do makes our contribution unique. Then covid erupted and the curtain fell.

Theatres have proved resilient and innovative. We produced an outdoor show called “846”, our response to George Floyd's death. National Theatre Live has been enjoyed by vast audiences at home. The Kiln's food programme provides fresh hot meals for hundreds. Battersea Arts Centre delivered digital activity and encouraged young people to keep writing.

Government support has focused too much on buildings, not on people. Life for freelancers, the lifeblood of our theatre, has been grim. We used to employ nearly 200 freelancers annually. This year, it is 75, and mostly

on very small projects. With no Government support, freelance actors, directors and designers are walking away, retraining to ensure a secure living. We are haemorrhaging creative talent, most of whom started in the subsidised theatre. Public investment in people led to creative wealth for the nation. Think of Sunday's Golden Globe Awards: Daniel Kaluuya, who first performed at the Royal Court; John Boyega, who began at Theatre Peckham. Think of Phoebe Waller-Bridge who started at the Soho; James Graham, playwright at Finborough Theatre; Michaela Coel who went from The Yard to critical acclaim on Channel Four. All are big commercial successes today. All are contributing to our vital creative economy, the vibrancy of our city centres and lifting our spirits. They are part of a massively successful ecosystem. Public investment in them drives both commercial success and the quest for diversity and equality. Yet young black and Asian creatives, women and those with disabilities are leaving theatre in droves. Nobody wants theatre to return to being a club for the elite and the well-connected. Investment in people, in the talent of tomorrow, must be our key ask today and only then will the arts bounce back strongly.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** I well remember the right hon. Lady's theatre and its excellent director who happened to be my namesake.

4.8 pm

**Scott Benton** (Blackpool South) (Con): May I begin by congratulating the Government on the truly remarkable success of the vaccination roll-out and the extraordinary progress made so far? More than 20 million vaccines have now been delivered, with 27,000 of my constituents receiving their first jab. It is, of course, imperative that we maintain this progress and continue to drive down infection rates so that we can meet the key tests set out in the Prime Minister's road map.

The road map is rightly cautious and led by data rather than dates. We are leading the world by providing a pathway out of restrictions. For businesses in my constituency, this provides an opportunity to look towards operating close to normal this summer. Until businesses in Blackpool can reopen, the financial support provided so far simply must continue. As a Government, we have stood by businesses throughout this pandemic, and it is vital that businesses are provided with the right conditions to prosper when they can reopen. I have been told by so many businesses how crucial the VAT reduction has been. By extending it for a further 12 months, we will give them the breathing space to drive forward the economy and protect livelihoods long after the furlough scheme has ended. The same can also be said for extending the current business rates freeze.

The overall package of support for businesses from the Treasury has been truly remarkable. In particular, the £1.6 billion investment in UK culture through the culture recovery fund has gone a long way towards securing the future of significant venues in Blackpool, such as the Tower Circus and the Grand Theatre, which will of course be delighted to hear that significant additional support for the arts and culture sectors will be included in tomorrow's Budget.

Not only do Blackpool's historic visitor attractions employ hundreds of local people directly, but they entice holidaymakers to Blackpool, to the benefit of all

businesses. For example, the winter gardens, a beneficiary of the culture recovery fund, attracts 1.1 million unique visitors per year, who spend money throughout Blackpool, thereby supporting other outlets.

It is fantastic that a second round of culture recovery grants are currently being administered; hopefully, this will include other local venues, such as the world-famous cabaret bar Funny Girls. Blackpool is of course renowned for its LGBT entertainment venues, and in that regard it would be remiss of me not to mention Basil Newby, who opened some of Blackpool's first gay venues 40 years ago and whose bars and clubs have been a mainstay of the LGBT community ever since. At the end of LGBT History Month, his contribution to the community deserves particular recognition, and I look forward to joining him in May when Funny Girls reopens.

4.11 pm

**Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff West) (Lab) [V]: I, too, welcome back to the House my dear friend and constituency neighbour, the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens).

I wish to make four quick points. First, others have mentioned the plight of freelance musicians and artists, who have been excluded from support because they do not fit the Chancellor's criteria for support. The criteria were drawn up hastily, and there was an excuse for that, but they were not amended when it was clear that they had arbitrary and negative consequences—for which there is no excuse—for many artists, musicians and others. Tomorrow, the Chancellor has another chance to put that right. In Wales, funds were set aside to help freelancers, but what is really needed is action from the Chancellor to support those who have been excluded, as called for by the Musicians' Union and others.

Secondly, we have missed the live music sector and could all do with a summer of live music events and festivals. The issue of insurance has already been mentioned in the debate. Last week, I received a written answer from the Minister for Digital and Culture that said:

"As such, HM Treasury does not believe that now is the right time for an insurance intervention."

Well, if this is not the right time for an insurance intervention, there never will be an insurance intervention from the Treasury. This is typical Treasury orthodox thinking. Now is the time for an insurance intervention to make sure that we can have live music back this summer. It would be the best boost not only for the industry but for morale and the economy.

Thirdly, covid has been hard enough for the music industry in itself but, combined with the negligent no-deal Brexit for musicians and touring artists, it is a double dose of disaster. Covid was unavoidable; the consequences of a failure to do a deal on touring were not only avoidable and predictable but predicted. A small window now remains to fix that before many successful British businesses are ruined by this negligence. That should be a priority for the Government.

Finally, let me look to the future. Covid has killed live music, but it can be revived. As we have heard, covid has also shone a light on the inequities of the new economics of music streaming and how it is failing to deliver for music songwriters and composers. The House may know that the DCMS Committee is conducting an inquiry into the matter. Some change is happening

[Kevin Brennan]

already—at 2 pm today, SoundCloud announced that it is going over to fan-powered royalties and a user-centric system, which is a step forward by the industry—but as well as the industry the Government should be prepared, if necessary, to reform the law in favour of creators and away from wealthy corporate market powers. They have been enjoying a gold rush from streaming; after the gold rush, let's have a “new home in the sun” for our brilliant musicians and songwriters.

4.14 pm

**Giles Watling** (Clacton) (Con) [V]: I suppose I should declare a general interest in this debate. It is good to see my friend the hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) back in her place—welcome back, Jo.

Three minutes is not enough time to say everything, and this should not need saying again, but I will say it anyway in case anyone has missed it: our cultural and creative sector has hitherto been world beating. It is the gold standard that the rest of the world looks to. From the tiniest repertory company in places such as Frinton-on-Sea to the greatest film and sound stages of places like Pinewood, producing films such as James Bond, Superman, Star Wars and many others, this is UK soft power at its very best. For generations, we have exported British values and British goods on the back of our national creative endeavour.

In terms of hard cash, the creative sector, as we have heard, contributed nearly £116 billion to the economy in 2019—a 43% increase since 2010. That was the fastest expansion in the UK economy, and the cultural and entertainment sectors are very much part of it. Even more importantly, more than 2 million people were working in the creative industries and that was growing—up by more than a third since 2011. Thanks to the pandemic, however, all that has changed, especially in this sector.

According to the Office for National Statistics, the industry saw a reduction of 44.5% in gross value in the three months up to June 2020—disastrous. For those employed in this sector, the future is precarious. As we have heard, many have already pre-emptively left the business, moving into more secure jobs in other sectors, and who can blame them? They are unlikely to return and deliver on their talents. The country is bleeding world-class talent.

Freelancers continue to struggle, with thousands unable to access Government support packages. We need to address that, which we can do by extending in terms of timescale and eligibility the self-employment income support scheme and the coronavirus job retention scheme. The schemes have been expensive, yes, but they also continue to be necessary, and should continue in the sectors where they are still needed.

The Government have a positive track record of supporting the culture and entertainment sectors through this pandemic with the £1.57 billion rescue package, which has done a lot of good, but it will not replace the losses. In England, for example, £123 million of grants has been awarded, but the loss in ticket revenue was over £1 billion. For such sectors, nothing can replace opening without restrictions, and I hope that we are able to hold to the dates on the road map.

The Government must stand ready to support all organisations within the culture and entertainment sectors until they are ready to return at full capacity. We cannot allow this sector to be cut off once more, and we must get that insurance scheme. Give the producers confidence.

4.17 pm

**Steven Bonnar** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): It has been estimated that as much as 60% of some towns' economic output comes directly from the night-time industry. The findings from a recent inquiry by the all-party parliamentary group for the night time economy highlight just how devastating an impact the pandemic has had in this sector. In some cases, businesses are trading at a mere 10% of their pre-covid turnovers and have been forced to make almost a third of their workforce redundant. Without urgent and tailored financial support, it is no exaggeration to say that this interwoven economic system faces the very real risk of irreparable damage and collapse.

Businesses in the sector not only help to drive the local economy, but act as meeting places and hubs of local social activity. They are a huge part of the fabric and culture of daily life on my constituency of Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill. Many respondents to the APPG's inquiry from the constituency viewed venues in the night-time industry locally as “safe locations” and “places which promote good mental health and well-being”

Despite that, many have now been closed for an entire year, resulting in many employees and businesses facing real financial hardship, yet Government support for this sector continues to be drip fed disproportionately by comparison with that afforded to other industries.

The UK music sector has been hit especially hard by the effects of the pandemic. Ongoing restrictions and concerns over crowd numbers have removed live performance income completely. The Musicians Union reported that at the time of the first lockdown, cancellations of live performances had resulted in a £14 million loss for its members—a figure that has only grown the longer the pandemic has worn on. Further cancellations of live performances, coupled with increasing uncertainty about any potential return to performing, led to 34% of MU members telling a recent survey that they were considering quitting the UK music sector entirely. This includes many of my own very talented constituents who have contacted me with their concerns. A similar percentage told the same survey that they had not been eligible for any form of governmental relief or support package since lockdown began.

Pre-pandemic figures show that the music industry contributed over £5 billion to the economy and export revenue was almost £3 billion. Clearly this was not a failing industry, yet it has been left decimated because it has not been operating for the duration of the pandemic. I therefore call on the Government to provide clear guidance and timescales for a return to operations, given that this sector depends on long-term planning and scheduling. The imminent Budget is the perfect chance to do this.

4.20 pm

**Nickie Aiken** (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con) [V] : I begin by paying tribute to the arts and culture sector, which has been so deeply affected by the

fall-out from the pandemic but has never given up. I also pay tribute to those in my own constituency, the home of the west end and theatreland—renowned museums, art galleries, music venues, individuals such as Andrew Lloyd Webber and Nica Burns, the Society of London Theatre, and so many more who have never accepted defeat and have carried on seeking solutions so that they can open safely.

The arts provide huge benefits to the UK's economy, providing billions of pounds to the Exchequer. I pay tribute to Ministers at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, who have appreciated how strongly the arts contribute to the economy. They have had unwavering support for the arts, lobbying the Treasury for financial support, as we saw in the £1.57 billion culture recovery fund and now, today, the £408 million in grants announced to help with reopening.

It is now about how we reopen. We now have dates in the road map, which is great, but we do need to address the issues regarding social distancing outlined in paragraph 145 of the road map. LW Theatres is moving ahead with its own research and development on making its venues covid-secure but is finding roadblocks. Currently, Health and Safety Executive policy does not allow for any spraying or misting with disinfectant or cleaning products, which is an excellent solution for indoor venues that can be used across the country. I would like the Government to put pressure on the HSE and persuade it to update its policies so that we can allow that to happen.

Many in the arts are waiting to hear from the Chancellor when he unveils his Budget tomorrow. They are hoping for good news on ongoing support for business rates and VAT on tickets, theatre tax relief being extended to digital performances without a physical audience, and an ongoing review of the self-employed support that is so needed for freelancers within the creative industries. I know how badly affected the excluded have been, and we need to address their ongoing concerns.

There is a light at the end of what has been a very dark tunnel. Now is the time to work together on how we can reopen safely. I urge the Government to undertake a major marketing campaign to promote confidence in people to return and enjoy everything our wonderful arts have to offer.

4.24 pm

**Colleen Fletcher** (Coventry North East) (Lab): In December 2017, it was declared that Coventry would be the UK city of culture in 2021. Fast-forward four years and, owing to the coronavirus pandemic, the landscape for our city's host year could not be any more difficult or challenging. Our city, our region and our arts industry have been hit hard by the coronavirus crisis. At a time when the culture and entertainment sectors should have been centre stage in Coventry, activities from theatre productions and live performances to exhibitions and galleries have closed their doors. Staff have been furloughed and revenues have plummeted, and the pandemic has seen the start of Coventry's year as city of culture put back to May 2021.

For many other cities, this would be an unmitigated disaster, but Coventry is a remarkable city. It is a city that has been shaped by its extraordinary history, culture and heritage. It is a city that has adapted, reinvented and reimagined itself time and again. It is a city that has

a background of overcoming adversity, of coming together with strength and pride, and of succeeding against considerable odds. That is why I know that, in spite of covid-19, Coventry will make the most of the opportunities that its city of culture status offers and produce something utterly spectacular.

We will show the country and the world who we are and what we can do, even in this most difficult of climates, but to do this and to ensure that Coventry reaps the full benefit of city of culture status by ensuring that the arts, creativity and culture kick-start the much needed regeneration of our city and play a central role in the economic and social success of our communities, we need Government support. I hope the Minister, wherever she is—I hope she is listening—will commit today to ensuring that Coventry's culture, arts and entertainment sectors receive the investment and support they need in order to make Coventry UK city of culture 2021 a complete success and to ensure that the event is a catalyst to developing a lasting social and economic legacy for current and future generations. With the right support, along with the new programme of events just launched today, Coventry city of culture 2021 will demonstrate the transformative powers of the arts on the lives of individuals, communities and the wider society, and lead our city's and country's cultural and entertainment sectors out of the pandemic in the most spectacular way.

4.26 pm

**Gill Furniss** (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): A little over a year ago, the streets of Sheffield were lined with open doors leading to theatres, cinemas and museums, which form the cultural heart of our city. Because of covid, those doors are now firmly closed. While the road map out of lockdown has given those in the sector some hope as to when they can return, I am deeply concerned that a year of uncertainty and limited support may mean that some could collapse before then.

A highlight of our cultural calendar is the Tramlines Festival, which is held each year in my constituency. However, after having to cancel last year, it has now had to contend with large uncertainties when determining whether it can go ahead this year. Simple common-sense steps, such as extending the 5% rate of VAT for the culture sector, would go a long way towards protecting events such as these, as would ensuring that the workers were receiving the vital financial support that should be due to them.

Doc/Fest is another shining example of Sheffield's proud entertainment sector. Each year, it attracts thousands of visitors, including big names such as David Attenborough, Joanna Lumley, Louis Theroux and Michael Moore. It delivers millions of pounds to the area, and this has a strong knock-on effect for small businesses. It is vital that we protect our culture industry so that events such as Doc/Fest are sustainable in the long term.

Sheffield City Council estimates that the snooker tournament normally benefits the local economy to the tune of £3 million each year. We will not reach step 3 of the road map in time for this, but event pilots are planned for step 2 of the road map. I hope that the Government will carefully consider the world snooker championships as a suitable pilot, to offer a much needed boost to the area.

[Gill Furniss]

Away from these big headline events, the day-to-day culture industry in Sheffield is the bedrock of our local economy. Our theatres, cinemas and museums are a great source of local pride for us all, as are the many dedicated music venues. Live music is also intertwined with many of our pubs and bars. There must therefore be greater guidance on when live music can return in those settings, to provide peace of mind for the industry.

Tomorrow, the Chancellor will unveil his Budget. This will be the last chance to prevent our culture sector from falling off a cliff edge when the existing support packages expire in the coming months. I urge him to deliver on his promise to do “whatever it takes” throughout the covid crisis. That would not only save thousands of jobs and businesses but protect the cultural sector that we all want to see thrive once more.

4.29 pm

**Robert Largan** (High Peak) (Con) [V]: This is an important and timely debate, particularly given the Chancellor’s announcement of an extra £400 million to support the arts, which will help the sector to prepare for reopening and to bounce back from the crisis. That welcome news builds on the £1.5 billion package of support that has already been delivered for arts and culture in High Peak and across the country. In places such as the Peak district, arts, culture and entertainment are at the very heart of our local economy. Their economic value is immense. They draw in visitors to our town centres, not just to see a show but to go out for a meal, spend money on the high street and have a drink in one of our brilliant local pubs—all things we have badly missed doing during the pandemic.

It is not just the economic value that is important. Arts and culture have social value that is impossible to measure properly. It is where we go for family outings, for date nights, for an excuse to catch up with friends we have not seen in a while. It is somewhere to go for a bit of escapism and inspiration after a long week. In short, arts and culture are good for business and good for the soul.

In the High Peak, we are very lucky to have some amazing, much-loved institutions. In Buxton, which we all know is Britain’s best spa town, we have the wonderful Buxton Opera House—one of the finest Matcham theatres anywhere in the country. It is architecturally gorgeous and creatively led by the talented Paul Kerryson. I strongly encourage hon. Members to come and visit as soon as it is safe to do so. There are lots of fantastic places for them to stay when they visit, such as Buxton Crescent, which reopened last year after a £17 million restoration. For those unfamiliar with it, it is similar to the Royal Crescent in Bath, only far more impressive.

Buxton also plays host to the renowned Buxton International Festival. Of course, the festival was forced to cancel the event last summer, and the opera house has been forced to close for 12 months now. Grants and the furlough scheme have certainly helped to soften the blow. I was delighted that the opera house and the international festival secured more than £600,000 from the Government’s culture recovery fund, which has helped them to keep going through the crisis. The first payment of that grant has helped the opera house introduce covid safety measures so that it can deliver a safe

environment for audiences, staff and artists when it reopens with a co-production of “A Little Night Music”, in partnership with the festival of Stephen Sondheim. Just yesterday, it was announced that the Buxton International Festival will be going ahead this July. Both are sure to lift our spirits after these long and difficult months. I pay tribute to the opera house and the festival organisers for their dedication and hard work. Planning a major international festival during a pandemic is no easy task. Michael Williams, chief executive of the Buxton International Festival, says that it is “like writing on water”.

The culture recovery grants are producing positive results and making a big difference, but it is vital that they are given not just to big venues and events but to smaller local institutions, such as Partington Players Theatre in Glossop. Ultimately, the key to recovery is ensuring that we roll out the vaccine and get the virus under control so that people can safely enjoy our institutions. Government support, although great at the moment, needs to be sustained; otherwise, we risk undoing the work of the past year to protect our culture and entertainment sectors. We all look forward to reopening this summer and starting to live life to the full once again.

4.33 pm

**Pete Wishart** (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP) [V]: In the short time available to me, I would like to focus exclusively on the plight of our musicians and those involved in our music industry. This has been an absolutely miserable time for our artists and musicians. Never before have conditions been so tough. Music is a sociable endeavour, and performance is all about people coming together. It is about communion, joy, comfort, solace and release. Quite simply, music is the discourse of the soul. Of all the industries and endeavours impacted by the prohibiting of human beings coming together, live music was always going to be the most heavily affected. A whole sector has effectively been closed down.

This is not just about musicians, miserable though it is for them; it is about the venues, the technical crews, the ancillary staff, the haulage, the band crews—thousands and thousands of people. Music was already just about the most precarious of professions. It used to be a field of dreams, but it is now mainly about ploughing some lonely furrow, hoping to make a few beans. Yes, it could yield great riches for the very few who reach the pinnacle of success, but most musicians will be more acquainted with poverty than plenty. Most musicians earn less than the minimum wage for their art, and traditional career routes have been turned on their heads. Next to no money is now earned from recorded works. That is unbelievable. Streaming and digital services have decimated band incomes, and musicians are subject to one of the most extensive and widest value gaps of any sector. Music is being listened to more than ever and is widely available, and people are indeed getting rich, but it is not the musicians; it is the platforms, the gatekeepers of music and the big tech companies that are earning a grotesque fortune from the wonderful works of others.

I was lucky, Madam Deputy Speaker. I plied my trade in music in the ’80s and ’90s—the good times. That was the peak of record sales, when profitability and touring were just about at their maximum. Sustainable careers were possible, and bands such as Runrig could make a good living. No more. So what do we do? Well, this

Government will see what they can do to make a dire situation worse. Just when music is at its wits' end, the Government want to close down a continent to live musicians, with the ridiculous arrangements they have managed to negotiate for bands in Europe.

What do we do to get out of this? It has to start with the Budget. Extending the self-employed support scheme and furlough beyond April has to happen, and we must ensure that insurance is in place for live performances. We need to ensure that a subsidy is available for venues to accommodate social distancing. My heart goes out to this generation of musicians who are having to confront so much, just to bring pleasure to us all. The Government have the tools. I ask them, "Please now use them. Help this sector out."

4.36 pm

**Chris Green** (Bolton West) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), who speaks so powerfully on behalf of the music sector. In debates, I often focus on topics such as the high-tech manufacturing UK steel industry, and the nascent nuclear fusion research effort, but this debate gives us the opportunity to focus on a sector that gives so much joy, delight, and so often inspiration. Industry, manufacturing or, more broadly, wealth creation are important and have their place, but they ought not to be the end in themselves. Culture, from poetry and music to the theatre, is immensely uplifting, and ought to be part of everyone's lives.

Following the covid pandemic and a series of lockdowns, we need the arts to spring back to life after their hibernation. The culture recovery fund has made a significant difference, but many organisations will need to return to normal performances to ensure their survival. That fund has contributed to a wide range of organisations, from The Snug in Atherton, to Bolton's Octagon theatre.

In the brief time available, I wish to highlight the breadth of talent to be found in and around my constituency. The Blackrod and Westhoughton arts groups regularly put on exhibitions. Horwich has its music festival, a fabulous series of chamber concerts are performed at the church of St James the Great at Daisy Hill, and Wingates has the world's best brass band. We have the Ladybridge Singers and the superb Bolton symphony orchestra. I am looking forward to a return to normality so that I, and many others, can enjoy our rich culture.

I pay special tribute to the Bolton Music Service, which is working with, training, and nurturing the next generation of musicians. That is of immense value to many individuals, families and other organisations. As Matthew Arnold wrote, culture is

"the best that has been thought and said"

and we ought to add that culture must also be performed. I therefore ask my right hon. Friend to do all he can to support the arts and culture at every level, and in every part of the country.

4.38 pm

**Julie Elliott** (Sunderland Central) (Lab) [V]: I welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) back to her place.

The importance of this sector cannot be underestimated. In 2019, the entertainment and cultural sectors contributed £10.5 billion and more than 200,000 jobs to the economy. These are often highly-skilled jobs, from musicians and

actors to those in production and sound tech, including engineers, electricians and many skilled professionals. That is only the economic benefit; never mind the happiness and joy that this sector gives to so many of us. The sector has been very hard hit by the pandemic, with the trade body for live music reporting revenue of almost zero since its start. Although there have been livestream shows, they do not replace the feeling of everyone getting together for live events. I am a member of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, and we have heard evidence about the precariousness of the economics of festivals and the inability of streaming to replace the income that artists would have received from events that have had to be cancelled.

There are some great examples of businesses in the sector adapting, not least Generator, an industry support agency in the north-east run by CEO Hannah Matterson. Generator has worked with more than 190 artists, providing over 1,000 hours of support online since the start of the pandemic, from meet-ups to online masterclasses on production and marketing, helping musicians to develop their careers. It has done a remarkable job, and I am sure that the shocking figures published by the Musicians' Union, showing that 34% of musicians are considering abandoning their career and that another 37% are unsure of their future, would be much higher if it were not for organisations such as Generator.

This is an industry that Britain is famous for and that we export around the world, and the Government must be more proactive in supporting it. The support package was welcome, but many thousands are missing out and are still not supported properly by Government. On top of that, there is the immense issue that future tours will face, thanks to the Government's failure to negotiate an adequate visa situation for artists to tour around Europe. A music or cultural export office is a great idea that will help big productions but not small artists who are starting out. The Government need to act. They have published a road map, but we have waited a week for the funding package. We hope to hear—and we must hear—in the Budget tomorrow what support the Government are going to give to this hugely important industry.

4.42 pm

**Sir John Hayes** (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Identity is everything. It enables the introspection necessary to understand oneself, the rooted foundation required to invest in community and the illuminating lens through which we relate to one another. Identity, however, can be divided into two parts: our objective identity—ethnicity, religion, family or nationality—and our subjective identity, freely chosen by each individual. It is in our communal culture and shared heritage that we find subjective identity.

Culture, in essence, defines a people. The depth of literary canon, poetic prowess, orchestral brilliance and artistic wonder elevates and embodies the sentiments of our nation, our people and, indeed, our civilisation itself. For culture and, in turn, identity to retain meaning, it must liberate itself from the monopolising clutches of a small-minded liberal bourgeoisie. As the late Roger Scruton, drawing on Hegel, said, it is a magnifying force "manifest in all the customs, beliefs and practices of a people."

It is reasonable to distinguish between high culture and common culture, but the first of those should not be accessible only to a few. Indeed, the working-class Britons

[Sir John Hayes]

in South Holland and The Deepings and across our nation have just as much right to access high culture as those in South Kensington.

Perhaps the framing truth in our political discourse should be a recognition that cultural identity can only survive when it is concentrated, particular and local, immune to dilution and decay. In 1984, the then Arts Council of Great Britain published a 10-year strategy titled “The Glory of the Garden”, its premise being the critical imbalance of arts provision between London and the regions. Twenty-six years later, I am not sure that that has changed much. We really do need cultural reach that stretches into every town, village and community across our nation.

However, recent research suggests that the problem has worsened. While London is home to 13% of the UK’s population, it receives 33% of Arts Council funding. Now, I like a trip to the National Gallery, as you know, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I like an evening at the Royal Opera House, but we need culture to reach out beyond there, particularly in the post-covid world—to enliven and enthral; to captivate people who have been dispirited, understandably, by all the restrictions of the past year. It is on that mission—that request to the Government—that I make this brief contribution. Let culture be seeded across our nation and let a thousand flowers bloom.

4.45 pm

**Sarah Olney** (Richmond Park) (LD) [V]: If we were to ask people what they were looking forward to when lockdown restrictions are eased, beyond seeing their family and luxuriating in the freedom to go wherever they like, many would talk about how much they have missed cultural experiences. Going to the theatre, listening to live music or comedy, watching a film at the cinema, browsing in a library or bookshop—those are the things that we have missed the most.

Many of us define ourselves in part by our responses to culture—even the Chancellor is keen to emphasise that he is a “Star Wars” fan—so being denied access to culture has denied us the opportunity to be our full selves: to think, to discover, to see the world differently. But the Chancellor is not a “Star Wars” fan just because of the special effects; he is also a fan of the vast amount of money that the franchise still generates, and that is also true of the economy as a whole.

It has been estimated that the arts and culture sector generated £10.47 billion for the UK economy in 2019. If we add on other creative sectors, such as fashion design, events and exhibitions, and video gaming, they not only add billions more to our economy but massively enhance our ability to reach out to the world to tell our story in many different formats and mediums. All that has been put at risk because of the lockdown.

There is little doubt that the lockdown was necessary and that the closure of theatres and other venues was essential for reducing contact. After all, contact is what the performing arts are all about—creating a dialogue between the performer and the audience. I commend the Government for their culture recovery fund. In my constituency of Richmond Park, the grants awarded to the Orange Tree theatre and the OSO Arts Centre have enabled those organisations to keep going throughout the closure.

However, the various funding schemes announced by the Government have not been enough to keep our cultural sector afloat as we progress towards a time when we can reopen. While the funding has been effective at keeping institutions going, it has ignored individuals. There is no point reopening our theatres and concert halls to find that there are no actors, playwrights or musicians to use them.

Many of the difficulties experienced by the cultural sector stem from the Chancellor’s baffling decision not to provide support to contractors. The cultural sector is built on short-term contracts. Many workers in these industries found themselves unable to be furloughed and did not qualify for the self-employment income support scheme. I heard from Amy Grudniewicz, who trained for five years to become a stage manager only to find that her first show closed after a few months because of lockdown. She qualified for only £18 a week in universal credit, which has not been enough.

There has been immense frustration, too, at the lack of recognition of the supply chain to our cultural sector. Many technicians and technical supplies companies have been left out of plans for help. Without grants, recovery fund, furlough or SEISS, many workers in the cultural sector have had absolutely no support.

I welcome the Government’s recent road map out of lockdown, and I support their cautious approach. What we need is clear guidance for all organisations and the general public. Above all, the Government need to underwrite the insurance so that live events can take place this summer; I am sure that the public will embrace them in their thousands after the months stuck inside looking at laptops.

4.48 pm

**Jane Hunt** (Loughborough) (Con): We are all aware that the cultural and entertainment sector has been hit hard during the pandemic due to the prolonged time that the sector has been restricted. Indeed, over the last few months, I have received many representations from theatres, nightclubs, bingo halls, casinos, heritage rail and many more businesses and individuals in my constituency that are very concerned about their ability to survive the pandemic.

While of course I understand the inherent risks that large gatherings bring, given that we are now seeing a fall in the number of people in hospital with covid-19, thanks in huge part to the fantastic work of the Government and the NHS in delivering over 20 million vaccinations across the UK, as well as one of the biggest testing systems in the world, we now need to begin opening up again.

I therefore welcome the announcement of the road map out of lockdown last week, which will give businesses the reassurances needed to begin planning their reopening. However, if we are to support them in that, we need to help build public confidence in the road map so that people will actually start booking tickets for events and visits. I would be interested to hear from the Minister how the Government plan to do that over the next few months. In my view, one such way would be by setting out as soon as possible what enhanced testing regimes and other safety measures will be introduced for events with large crowds. To this end, I would also be interested to hear from the Minister the Government’s expected timeframe for the events research programme, and specifically when it expects to report on its findings.

Finally, I would like to mention the tourism and heritage sectors. In the Loughborough constituency, we have a wealth of tourist and heritage sites, including Great Central Railway, the Carillon tower museum, Charnwood Museum, the Old Rectory Museum, the only operational bell foundry in the UK, the Peter Le Marchant Trust and the ancient Outwoods woodland, to name a few. They are all fantastic places to visit.

As restrictions are lifted, we must seize the opportunity to promote domestic tourism to boost our local economies, support businesses and create much-needed jobs. This is an area in which I am very keen to do more work on over the coming months, particularly in the run-up to English Tourism Week. I would be interested to hear what plans the Government have to support domestic tourism. The Government have, of course, already provided a large package of support to heritage sites in Loughborough, and I thank them very much for that help. We now need to work to ensure that those organisations are able to start up again and thrive—employing people, contributing to our local communities and, ultimately, paying their taxes. They need a hand up, not a handout, and we need confidence in the sector.

4.51 pm

**Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab) [V]: It is great to see my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) back in her place.

In the brief time that I have, I want to focus on the night-time economy and on what we need to do so to support night-time venues; most have not been able to operate at all for almost a year, and I would argue that they have gone under the Government's radar. As welcome as the culture recovery fund was, it has had a limited impact, particularly on nightclubs. Nightlife and music venues are the beating heart of our town and city centres, and support so many other businesses in their ecosystems and supply chains. I worked in the music business, and nightclubs in particular, for more than 20 years. I also worked at festivals, and add my voice to the festival industry's plea for an insurance safety net scheme for large events. If there is one single measure that can help to allow a summer of culture and creativity, it is that one.

I have seen close up the joy and sense of community that nightclubs and music venues bring. I have also seen the massive £66 billion contribution of the night-time industry to our economy. I am chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the night time economy, and just before Christmas we launched an inquiry to look at the effects of the pandemic on night-time industries. Remarkably, we received over 20,000 responses from businesses, employees, freelance workers, customers, industry organisations and local authorities. We found that, without urgent Government support, night-life businesses could well be lost.

We are at a critical point. Lots of venues have just about survived, but they are racking up debts on costs like rent and utilities, and just need some help to get them through until they can fully reopen. I fervently hope that tomorrow we will see an extension of business support, including business rates relief and VAT reduction. We need some sector-specific grants until businesses can fully reopen. We also need a solution for the amassed commercial debt, whether that is a shared burden approach to debt, as we have seen in other countries, or a long-term restructuring so that debt does not need to be paid off

until businesses are able to do so in the long term. Of course, we also need furlough extension and help for those excluded individuals.

The Government have set out the road map to reopening, which the night-time venues have cautiously welcomed. But it is one thing to be able to open and another to be able to do so at a capacity that makes it viable, so it is really important that the Government consult and engage quickly with the sector on testing, capacity restrictions and whatever other mitigations can allow venues to reopen. The events research programme also has to be carried out in close partnership with the brilliant, creative people in the industry.

It feels like the end is in sight, but this is a really important moment. We have a crucial job just to get our businesses through the next few months until they are able to reopen. We cannot let these vital businesses and venues fold; we cannot jeopardise our wider economic recovery that they are so important to; and we cannot have our towns and city centres becoming ghost towns.

4.54 pm

**Mrs Natalie Elphicke** (Dover) (Con) [V]: I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak in this debate. Dover and Deal is an area steeped in culture and brimming with entertainment; whether for a day, week or month, or throughout the course of a year, there is so much to see and enjoy in our white cliffs country. Our role as guardian of the nation means that we have been involved in some of the world's defining events, from the rise of the Roman empire to Nelson's Deal, key battles in world war two and, more recently, being on the frontline of the exit from the European Union.

As such, our two most iconic pieces of history are Dover castle and the world-famous white cliffs. Dover castle is rightly one of the top attractions in the country, and a few miles on we have Deal castle, Walmer castle, with its eight acres of award-winning gardens, as well as Crabble corn mill, the most complete working example of a Georgian water mill in Europe. The mill is one of the many local ventures to have received financial support from the Government's cultural recovery fund, a fund that has paid out more than £300,000 in my constituency and has been a lifeline for some of our most loved cultural organisations and heritage sites.

However, Dover and Deal is so much more than its cultural heritage, enviable though that unquestionably is. We are ambitious to make our cultural heritage the foundation stone from which we build our culture and entertainment future, for Dover and Deal are also home to leading galleries, artists, potters and live music venues. It is an area rich in the performing arts, with the Astor theatre, the Dover film festival, the Deal music and arts festival, the showcase annual Deal Marines remembrance concert, the Lighthouse music and arts pub and so much more besides. We are planning for the future, through Dover's bid for the future high streets fund. This further investment would allow us to bring together varied cultural and creative offerings in Dover with a brand new arts and creative centre.

That brings me to my call for a permanent recognition for Dame Vera Lynn. There may be no bluebirds in Dover, but there will always be Vera Lynn in Dover's heart and its musical soul. She truly encapsulates the enduring importance of entertainment and the cultural

[Mrs Natalie Elphicke]

arts. It is only right that her contribution to the arts and the nation is given the recognition it deserves, and I am supporting the important campaign for this lasting legacy to her in the white cliffs country.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** What a good idea.

4.57 pm

**Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op) [V]:** Tomorrow's Budget is eagerly anticipated by many of my constituents who work in the culture and entertainment sectors in Vauxhall. Those sectors rely hugely on high-density indoor venues to turn a profit, and as they will not be able to return to business as normal in time for summer, they have suffered and will continue to suffer one of the longest sector lockdowns of this pandemic. We must all fight to ensure their survival.

When we talk about saving the cultural and entertainment sectors, we may think of some of the amazing buildings where we have seen an exhibition or a play, the shows we watch on TV or the music that we have live-streamed, but behind these venues and productions are millions of freelancers—self-employed support workers, so many of whom have fallen through the gaps in Government support. Polling data from the Musicians' Union, based in my constituency, which I recently met, shows that 38% of musicians have missed out on Government support and 34% are leaving the industry altogether. Tomorrow's Budget must recognise that and provide a sector-specific support package to ensure that there are no more closures and no more redundancies as we reach the final hurdle in the fight against covid-19.

4.58 pm

**Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con):** The cultural and entertainment sectors are crucial for not only our economy but our wellbeing and happiness. As so many have said in this debate, live music, events, festivals and county shows are occasions that mean a huge amount to millions of people. They are landmark occasions in the lives of so many of our constituents. The big headline events have huge soft power reach around the world and the smaller local ones can make a hugely positively local impact, bringing communities together and supporting our town centres. I mention in particular the East Barnet festival, the Barnet medieval festival and the Cherry Lodge Summer Soulstice festival in my constituency, which were all cancelled last year and were all greatly missed. Despite the Government's huge £1.57 billion culture recovery fund—the biggest ever investment in culture in our nation's history—we lost so many festivals and big events in 2020 and we are now in danger of losing them for another whole year. I therefore repeat the call made recently by UK Music to "Save Our Summer" and set out three steps to achieve that.

First, targeted support through furlough and business rate relief should continue for events and cultural venues until the sector is allowed to open up properly again. More needs to be done to help freelancers, who have so far missed out on any covid financial support. Secondly, we need greater certainty on the timetable for reopening, and especially for the plan to resume big events on

21 June. It is welcome that we now have a road map and indicative dates, but getting an event on this summer requires planning and spending now. The pilots to establish whether it will be safe to start big events on time need to go ahead by the beginning of April at the latest—jobs and business survival depend on that. If the Government believe that proof of vaccination or testing should play a part in the return of large festivals and events, they need to set out how that will operate. That should focus on risk-based solutions dependent on the type of venue, the audience numbers and the type of event. Any requirement for testing or vaccination must be proportionate, operationally feasible, affordable and consistent with privacy.

Thirdly, and lastly, we need a Government-backed scheme for pandemic insurance. Those are three steps to prevent another summer of cancellations; three steps to save our summer. I urge Ministers to put them into action.

5.1 pm

**Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab) [V]:** May I also welcome back my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens)? I also put on record my immense gratitude to my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) and my parliamentary neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern), for their tireless campaigning on this issue over many years.

For 10 long years, the Conservative party have taken a wrecking ball to the very foundations of our cultural industries. Ten years of cuts to arts funding and school budgets have decimated the sector. The prestige venues that only the rich can afford may have been preserved, but, thanks to the remorseless advance of property developers, countless grassroots music venues have had to shut up shop. Future generations of talent have nowhere to flourish. Now, the Government's failure to give the cultural industries the support they need risks condemning huge swathes of the sector to oblivion.

Although the £1.5 billion culture recovery fund was welcome, it has rescued buildings, not livelihoods. Fifty-five thousand jobs have already been lost, and too many creative freelancers—including over a third of all musicians—have been allowed to fall through the gaps of the Government's financial support schemes, with many leaving the industry for good. The Government's failure to guarantee creative workers visa-free access to Europe risks depriving thousands of people of a vital part of their income when the pandemic is over.

The failure by the Government to step up and meet this challenge has had a devastating impact on my constituency. The hard work and determination of council leader Janette Williamson and Labour councillors saved the historic Williamson Art Gallery and Museum, but countless other venues have been forced to close their doors forever, and many others remain at risk.

I thank the all-party parliamentary group for the night time economy for giving me access to the response of my constituents to its important inquiry on the impact of covid-19, which testified to a deep-rooted anger at the Government's chaotic handling of the pandemic and a widespread sense of fear that many venues in my constituency will not survive the next few months. The proprietors of Gallaghers Traditional Pub, which regularly hosts live music, are right to feel "angry and let down".

There needs to be change when the Chancellor unveils the Budget tomorrow. It is a final chance to save a vital part of our country's cultural fabric and, with that, a major sector of our economy. Instead of half measures, we need a bold and ambitious strategy that gives the sector confidence in its future and its ability to thrive when we win the war on covid. An extension to the furlough scheme, the cut in VAT and business rates relief will be essential to safeguarding jobs in the sector, but I also call on the Chancellor to recognise the specific challenges facing our country's cultural industries and at long last introduce bespoke support for a sector that provides not just jobs but enjoyment for millions of people.

5.4 pm

**Matt Vickers** (Stockton South) (Con): I think I speak for all of us when I say that the past year, despite some individual stories of good news, has been absolutely rotten; 2020 is not a year that any of us would wish to repeat. This is especially true for businesses in our economy, but the financial burden is not being shared across all sectors of the economy evenly, and those sectors that rely on people seeing each other face to face or being close to others—such as hospitality and, pertinently for this debate, culture and entertainment—have been particularly badly hit by measures introduced to break the chain of transmission.

As a result of the measures to protect the NHS, museums have closed their doors, live music venues have fallen quiet and sports arenas have stayed unnaturally empty. The cultural and entertainment sector is a massive asset to the UK both economically—it is an industry worth more than £10 billion—and as a major soft power attribute. More than that, these businesses and venues bring people joy and make life worth living. Recognising that, the Government have been great in introducing support packages, such as the culture recovery fund, which have benefited and been a lifeline to businesses and venues across the country and in my Stockton South constituency.

The Government have now set out their road map for easing restrictions for the entire economy. This will provide clarity to these businesses, allow them to plan for the months ahead and, hopefully, put them on a more sustainable footing. While I would be delighted if these opening dates were moved forwards, I know that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and his ministerial colleagues have been guided by the science and will open up as soon as it is safe to do so.

As we move forward and look towards reopening these businesses, there are two fundamental things we must remember. First, we need to remember more than just those businesses that are in London. A lot of the conversations focus on big venues in London and in the south, which is somewhat understandable given how much of the industry is concentrated in the capital, but not all of them are in London, and we need to remember the businesses in Stockton and the north-east as well.

**Mark Tami** (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): Does the hon. Member agree with me that we have to get this right, because if we allow these venues to open and then we have to close them again, they cannot survive that another time?

**Matt Vickers:** I agree that we cannot be closing these venues again, but do you know what, with the fantastic vaccination programme, I have every ambition that these doors will be open, these venues and these jobs will survive—and we will restore a bit of joy to people's lives.

These venues are incredibly important. They enrich our lives and they nurture local talent. I have many fond, and perhaps hazy, memories of Ku Stockton, where I have listened to live music, and of the ARC, and I recommend its comedy club to anybody. Both have been battered by the pandemic, both have benefited from Government support and both cannot wait to reopen. The Friends of the Stockton & Darlington Railway have done tremendous work on preserving our heritage, and nothing will prevent them from celebrating 2025, the bicentenary of that very first passenger railway journey. They, too, have benefited from Government support and they cannot wait to get rolling. We need to make sure that when we are talking about supporting culture and the arts, we are talking about the little guys and we are talking about all four corners of our nation.

Secondly, we need to have a frank discussion about coronavirus, because it may be unlikely that we will ever be in a situation where the risk is zero. We need to have a discussion about how much risk we are collectively willing to take to get our lives back to normal. We need to have this conversation for our culture and entertainment sector, which cannot go on like this in perpetuity, but also for ourselves and our constituents. We need to have this debate not only to support this industry, but to bring some joy back into our lives as well.

5.8 pm

**Ian Byrne** (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab) [V]: Many of my constituents in Liverpool, West Derby are part of the cultural and entertainment sector, and they have been hit so hard by the events of the last year. Liverpool has one of the biggest and most vibrant arts and culture sectors in the UK, and it is estimated to contribute 10% to our city region's economy. The recent renaissance of my great city has been built on the talent within our area and our cultural offering, along with the warmest of welcomes from a city renowned for its hospitality. During the pandemic, many in the arts have been keeping our communities going, helping those who are struggling and socially isolated, and dropping off food parcels.

When the pandemic hit, the Government should have been there to help workers in the cultural sector. Instead, their support has been inadequate and, in many cases, non-existent. The majority of these workers are self-employed and they have been hit hard because of gaps in Government support. Data from the Musicians' Union suggests that 38% of musicians, as well as the road crews that underpin the industry, have fallen through the gaps. I have spoken to some of our incredible musicians in the city about the issues they have been facing over the last couple of months. One said, "Throughout the pandemic I have seen many people lose their jobs, homes and lives. I have always tried my hardest to keep my head up and stay positive at such a tough time. I have seen myself become dormant, with jobs as a musician disappearing, and not being able to see my friends and family has been upsetting and difficult." Another said, "There are musicians suffering who make their living playing covers in the clubs and bars around the city. It has been

[Ian Byrne]

extremely tough for them, as you can't really transfer to playing online as part of somebody's night out. That cannot be replicated." Another said to me, "Many road crews like ours are limited companies and we have only been able to access loans. We have no financial support and most groups rely on live income which has completely disappeared since March 2020."

Tomorrow, the Chancellor's Budget must deliver real support for workers themselves, fill gaps in support and meet the asks of the trade unions. The cultural recovery fund announced in July was welcome, but workers were not placed at the heart of it and have continued to be left without any help ever since. The talent in this country in both the cultural and entertainment sectors can be a driving force behind the recovery of both my city and the entire nation. Let us give them all the support to flourish, not choke them into extinction.

5.11 pm

**Chris Clarkson** (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): I want to start by thanking the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport team for their engagement and accessibility during the pandemic.

Heywood and Middleton is not a part of the world necessarily known for its arts scene, but the cultural sector plays as important a role in my constituency as it does in, for example, the west end or central Manchester. Rochdale borough, where my seat is located, has one of the lowest levels of cultural engagement in the north-west. In fact, it is in the bottom 1% of areas for culture accessibility. That is why the ability for what we do have to rebound is so essential.

When I say to my right hon. Friend the Minister that the money received to support Rochdale Boroughwide Cultural Trust's Link4Life was a genuine lifeline, I mean it. The generous injection of funds to our borough was the difference between it being able to carry on or not. I want to pay particular tribute to Jan Hind and Darren Grice at Link4Life for their passion and enthusiasm for our communities and for the work they have done to make Rochdale's cultural sector not just viable but an integral part of our plans to level up an area of extremely high deprivation. By integrating their offering into the borough's plans for education, employment and regeneration, they have not only created a vibrant cultural scene but a sustainable commercial one, ensuring that a wider range of options can be offered and maintained, while bringing existing assets up to date and integrating them into each township in the borough in a way that recognises the character and history of each community yet opens those communities to new experiences at the same time.

The hard work of Jan, Darren and the Link4Life team has seen Dippy the Dinosaur visit Rochdale from the Natural History Museum, a west end production supported by Selladoor put on at the Middleton Arena, and overall engagement with cultural activities in the borough increased by a factor of seven. To have lost that during the pandemic when it was just ramping up would have been an absolute tragedy. It would have robbed some of the most deprived communities in the country of a programme of events, assets and engagement that we simply would not be able to access elsewhere. I also thank them for the work they have done to engage

both me and the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) at every step, so that we are not just aware of where they are at the moment, but what their longer-term aspirations are for Heywood, Middleton and Rochdale. That is why I also back their application for the leisure recovery fund, which will see much-needed assets returned to use, improving health and wellbeing, both physical and mental, as we return life to normal.

Sociologist Charles Cooley once opined:

"An artist cannot fail; it is a success to be one."

I am not sure that someone could say that about politicians, but I would like to put on record my sincere thanks to my right hon. Friend and the Department for his success here. By taking the action that he has taken, he has done so much more than safeguard a few assets, buildings or a business plan; he has ensured the recovery of our dreams, our hopes and our ambitions. That is not a bad thing at all.

5.14 pm

**John McDonnell** (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab) [V]: I pay tribute to Equity, the Public and Commercial Services Union, the Broadcasting, Entertainment, Cinematograph and Theatre Union and all those trade unions that have worked so hard throughout the pandemic to ensure that their members are properly represented and that the plight of the workers in the cultural sector has been exposed.

The majority of Equity's members have had all or most of their work cancelled as a result of covid. Large numbers are now in debt and struggling. Although the vast majority of Equity members are self-employed and freelancers, over 40% have been unable to claim under the self-employed income support scheme. Many have had to fall back on universal credit. Because 40% have also not worked at all since March last year and many do not work for qualifying organisations, they have not benefited from the culture recovery fund. The overall consequence is that many are leaving the profession. Recent research has highlighted the large number of black, Asian and minority ethnic female workers and women who are parents or carers forced out of the sector. This is an immense loss of talent.

Equity has four simple asks: first, widen the support available via the self-employed support scheme grant to include new entrants with a 2019-20 tax return, those operating through personal service companies and the other excluded groups; secondly, when the fourth self-employed grant details are published tomorrow, continue to allow a grant based on at least 80% of average profits; thirdly, continue the suspension of the minimum income floor for universal credit beyond the end of April 2021; and fourthly, continue the £20 uplift in universal credit standard allowances beyond April 2021 as well.

In the longer term, Equity is looking at how to create jobs and, specifically, opportunities for marginalised groups in our society to enter into the cultural professions. It is calling for the introduction of a minimum income guarantee for creative workers as a long-term way to remedy low and often no pay and all those barriers to access for creative professionals. All the unions are now saying that the Government must pursue a strategy that ensures employment and job creation across the UK for a broad range of creative workers who do so much to enhance the quality of our lives.

5.17 pm

**Stephen Hammond** (Wimbledon) (Con) [V]: It is a pleasure to follow my fellow London MP, the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), and to welcome the hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) back to her place.

At the outset of these remarks, I want to say how much I welcome and commend the Government's support for entertainment. Throughout this pandemic, I have used these debates and questions to raise issues on behalf of the hospitality, events and entertainment industry in Wimbledon. As many know, we have the best theatre outside the west end, the New Wimbledon Theatre. We have the internationally renowned children's theatre, the Polka, a huge entertainment industry featuring the book fest and the music fest, and a large number of events and exhibition companies. I want to concentrate my short contribution on the three issues that will help them to survive and thrive.

While there has been extensive support, many of the people who work in entertainment, events, hospitality and supply chains in Wimbledon are self-employed freelancers. These are the people who will ensure that the creative industries can reopen and thrive, but most of them have not qualified for either furlough or business grant support. Many who became self-employed in 2019 do not qualify for the self-employed income support scheme. So with covid restrictions remaining in place for longer than we all would have liked and a recognition that it will take some time after 21 June for the events industry to fully recover, can I say that, a year into the pandemic, the only just and fair policy would be to forward the qualifying date for the self-employed income scheme by a year? I hope that we will hear that from the Minister or the Chancellor in the next couple of days.

The Minister for Digital and Culture was right to say in her opening remarks at the Dispatch Box that there is a cautious approach to relaxation based on data, not dates, but a number of issues still remain for the exhibition and events industry. Last year, pilots were conducted on how these events and exhibitions could be conducted in a covid-safe way. We have not yet heard whether those pilots will feed into the road map. Can my hon. Friend assure us about that? Post 12 April, theatres can have audiences above the 30 limit through steps 4 and 5, but there is nothing yet for meetings and exhibitions. I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) on the insurance guarantee scheme. Finally, large events will recover only if there is some certainty over the unlocking of global travel. That remains uncertain and the Government need to give some clarity as to when or if quarantine measures will be reviewed.

5.20 pm

**Hywel Williams** (Arfon) (PC) [V]: This pandemic has been hugely difficult for the arts throughout the UK. In Wales, musicians, performers and others, such as freelance writers and technicians, often working in small companies and in very precarious circumstances, have been hit really hard. There is a particular issue in Wales in that so many aspects of the arts operate in two languages, exemplifying, I think, the force of the argument that the arts are not additional, just to be preserved as nice to have, but a vibrant part of our lives with a huge contribution to make to our wellbeing and to framing our ways of

seeing the world. For example, the arts and entertainment sectors are central strands in the efforts to reach a total of 1 million Welsh speakers by 2050 and that is set out explicitly in the policy document on this matter.

Equally, the arts are integral to our sense of ourselves and our wellbeing in Wales, from huge participative productions such as Michael Sheen's extraordinary "Port Talbot Passion" with National Theatre Wales and WildWorks, to bringing solo harp music into a residential establishment for dementia sufferers here in Caernarfon. We have other large-scale events such as the Hay Festival and our National Eisteddfod, the largest peripatetic arts festival in Europe. That has been postponed again this year, but has risen magnificently to the challenge of going online, with spectacular results.

I should note also my interest as a member of Gorsedd Beirdd Cymru, the Welsh Gorsedd of Bards, but this is not just about our domestic events. The International Eisteddfod at Llangollen, established at the end of the second world war as a means of international reconciliation, is also adapting its format beyond the live event. I hope that the international Harp festival to be held here in Caernarfon next year will not be impacted. Without trying to cover absolutely everything, our television and film industry, our popular music and the visual arts must also be supported through this hardest of hard times.

In conclusion, many contributors to this debate have highlighted the economic value of the arts, particularly in terms of exports and of promoting world renown. I want to say that the arts are a good in and of themselves, for life is a matter not just of the stomach, but of the heart, the mind and the human spirit. That is why the arts are so important at this desperate time, inspiring us not to yield, never to despair.

5.23 pm

**Dr Kieran Mullan** (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con) [V]: I wanted to take part in this debate because I know how difficult things have been for the events and entertainment sector in my constituency. It is not possible in the time that I have to cover every single business and venue that has been affected. Needless to say I know that there are many, so I will focus my remarks on a few examples.

First, I have two nightclubs in my constituency, Nakatcha and The Studio. Nightclubs are not always the most popular venues with everybody in small towns but, as many of us have come to recognise, building the best possible future for our towns means that they have to be places in which young people want to live. Having a night-time offer that appeals to them is important and nightclubs are a big part of that. They also tend to employ a younger workforce, which we know is most at risk as we come out of the pandemic.

I thank the owners of those two venues for the responsible way in which they behaved during the first lockdown. They took the decision not to open before being told to close: there surely cannot be a better example of business leaders acting responsibly and thinking about their communities. I will never forget that, and I want everyone else in Crewe and Nantwich to know about it. They have not been able to operate as nightclubs since. The whole way through lockdown they have done a great job of lifting people's spirits on social media, operating as first-rate meme factories on Facebook. They are looking forward to reopening in June if everything

[Dr Kieran Mullan]

goes to plan. Will the Minister confirm that nightclubs will have access to the £5 billion reopening fund so that they can successfully roar back into action?

The other key venue that has been impacted is the Crewe Lyceum Theatre. It was supported by the £1.75 billion culture fund, which has been a lifeline for those at the theatre and I know how grateful they are. I thank the Government for their help, but we must ensure that the theatre can straddle the transition to reopening when it comes to the unwinding of furlough and the reintroduction of business rates.

My constituency is also lucky to have big cultural events such as the Nantwich Food Festival and the jazz festival, but both have already had to take the incredibly difficult decision to cancel their 2021 editions. These hugely successful events bring visitors and money to the town and they are part of our community. It was fantastic to see the team of food festival volunteers running community lockdown awards, kindly sponsored by Applewood Independent. The festivals are good examples of events that may need help in terms of insurance as we tackle ongoing uncertainty when events need to plan far in advance to be delivered successfully.

All that highlights how important the events research programme will be to so many people, jobs and businesses. It is vital that the Government are relentless in ensuring that the programme is robust, is delivered to time and looks at the sector fairly in terms of the risk. Vaccines have provided a light at the end of the tunnel, which has been particularly long and dark for this sector. I hope that we can do everything we can to get it out the other side.

5.26 pm

**Rebecca Long Bailey** (Salford and Eccles) (Lab) [V]: As Members will be aware, Salford is a proud cultural and creative destination. Staring out across the Salford docks in 1983 at an industrial wasteland that had been ravaged by deindustrialisation, a group of councillors were proud of their city and they had a dream. They took a gamble and that dream became MediaCity. However, the precarity of the sectors that rebuilt our city could now break our city, as the livelihoods of thousands hang in the balance.

Many workers in Salford are insecure or freelance. For example, a third of people working in media alone are freelancers. However, even before the pandemic hit, too often so-called off-payroll working effectively made people in this sector zero-rights employees, with none of the rights of being an employee or the tax advantages of being self-employed. I draw Members' attention to the National Union of Journalists' freelance rights charter, which sets out a series of ways in which we could give greater protections and security to such workers.

The pandemic makes interventions to resolve insecurity more vital than ever. Millions have been excluded from any of the Government's financial support packages. The Chancellor has repeatedly ignored their cries for help and they are desperate. If that was not enough, freelance media workers in England are also set to lose out on further training and reskilling opportunities as the Government plan to axe the union learning fund, directly threatening the Federation of Entertainment Unions' training project—one of the few places media and creative freelancers can access free skills training.

Will the Minister assure me today that she will ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer to include in his Budget statement tomorrow, first, an immediate emergency grant for those affected, secondly, new monthly arrangements while restrictions remain in place—in complete parity with the extension of the coronavirus job retention scheme and self-employment income support scheme—thirdly, retrospective payments for full and final settlements to deliver parity and fairness for those excluded from meaningful support and, finally, furlough extension for as long as it is needed? The failure to do any of those things not only means the deliberate engineering of social injustice into the fabric of our workforce, but will undermine Salford's future as a media and cultural powerhouse.

5.29 pm

**Richard Graham** (Gloucester) (Con) [V]: It is a real treat to join this debate. I like what the American journalist Walter Lippmann said about culture:

“Culture is the name for what people are interested in”.

What are we most interested in? Of course, it will vary by generation, background, geography and many other things, but there is much that we all share, from our cinemas, trees, parks, hills and all of nature to our sports clubs, pubs, nightlife, churches, mosques, heritage and traditions. All are part of what we are interested in, and there is much more, of course, besides.

Not all those things fall under DCMS, but a lot of them do. When many such things have been out of reach for much if not all of the past year, and businesses responsible for the entertainment part of this debate—I think particularly of those involved in leisure, weddings and events—have not been able to open, we have to be grateful that the taxpayer has stepped in, via DCMS, to support so much of what should come back as quickly as possible.

I thank the Department for its work through the culture recovery fund, which has in my constituency of Gloucester provided resources to the Sherborne cinema, which is a great independent cinema; the Guildhall arts centre; the Music Works, which is part of the revival of musical culture in our city; the Three Choirs festival, which represents a great and long tradition of cathedral music; the city council itself; our cathedral, which is at the heart of so much of what happens in any cathedral city; the history festival, in respect of which I declare an interest as the founder and chairman; and St Mary de Crypt, where I am a patron. For all those things, I thank the Department.

I also thank the National Lottery Heritage Fund, which has played such a huge part in our city's regeneration over the past decade, as has English Heritage through the heritage action zone project, which came into being before the pandemic but is being implemented now and is incredibly important. All these things matter collectively. I include things such as the green recovery fund, which comes from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs rather than DCMS and has supported the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust, which is headquartered on Robinswood Hill, right in the middle of our city, and is an incredible feature.

I not only thank all those organisations but pay tribute to people such as my friend Justin who runs Butlers, the best nightclub in Gloucester, for all the work that he

did on volunteering with food during the pandemic, and Mecca, which helped on that—lots of organisations have been pulling together. If culture is what we are interested in—

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** I am terribly sorry, Richard, but we have to move on.

5.32 pm

**Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP) [V]:** I am glad to have the opportunity to contribute to this debate and to advocate on behalf of the arts and entertainment sector in Northern Ireland which, in common with those elsewhere, has been profoundly disrupted by covid and has a long path back to normality and recovery. Typically, a venue needs to fit in 50% to 70% of capacity for a show to be viable, and that is unlikely to be safe for some time to come, so the sector is not going to be able to throw open the doors and bounce back to normal any time soon.

I welcome the additional funding throughout the year, but that and future funding will have to be underpinned by timely decisions and flexibility by the Northern Ireland Executive. The current emergency funding is being undermined by the structures of accounting periods, with groups getting very welcome cash injections but windows of just a couple of months in which to spend them. This means we require flexibility around existing and future funding and, going forward, a multi-annual framework that will address the chronic underfunding of arts in Northern Ireland which, at just £5.31 per head, compares unfavourably with Wales, at £10.03, or the equivalent of £12.79 in the Republic of Ireland.

We need a recovery strategy that acknowledges the value of the arts to the economy and its full ecosystem, as well as the intrinsic value of the arts, and that understands that future sector-wide reconstruction and redeployment would be far costlier than a rescue package and managed recovery right now. People who are being forced out of work in the arts because of these challenging years have skills that it will not be easy to replace.

I have spoken before about the gaps in the support for the self-employed and about how the sector is based on collaboration and short-term projects so is almost casualised by definition. I welcome hints that furlough will be extended in the Budget tomorrow, but I urge the Chancellor to ensure that the self-employed in the sector—including part-timers, PAYE freelancers and others—for whom solutions have been identified are addressed.

I welcome the calls from other Members about theatre tax relief, which is a tool to help people who are producing this year. I hope it is extended to digital—the safe platform that many are able to access this year. I support calls for mobility for artists around Europe. The devastating consequences of that issue are being masked by covid.

Seo Seachtáin na Gaeilge in Éireann, ó thuaidh agus ó theas. Seo seans againn ár dteanga agus ár gcultúir agus ár n-ealaíon a cheilúradh agus thig le gach duine sult a bhaint as—finally, it is Irish Language Week in Ireland, north and south, which is an opportunity to celebrate the value of language to culture and the arts in a way that can be enjoyed by everybody. Go raibh maith agat.

5.35 pm

**James Daly (Bury North) (Con):** In Greater Manchester, the importance to our area of the cultural sector cannot be overstated. The visitor economy in GM is worth £2.6 billion per annum and supports 105,000 jobs. The digital and creative industries are worth £4.4 billion gross value added each year and support 78,500 jobs. Music alone contributes £169 million to the regional economy every year. However, we must not see culture and the arts as the preserve of cities and established cultural centres. In Bury, The Met theatre is a creative hub, hosting everything from Shakespeare to live comedy and its fantastic annual beer festival. Just as importantly, the pandemic has shone a light on the incredible work it does in the wider community, working with children from all backgrounds. I am delighted that it received Government support during lockdown.

In my constituency, the East Lancashire Railway is an iconic heritage asset. It is crucial to the visitor economy and supports jobs and skills, and is a direct working link to our past. Steam engines, as I am sure everyone will agree, are things of beauty. Culture takes many different forms throughout the country. ELR has received Government funding during lockdown, which has ensured its survival.

The Fusilier Museum is central to my town's sense of identity as the proud home of the Lancashire Fusiliers. Again, I am thankful for the Government funding it received to continue its important cultural and heritage role within Bury, Ramsbottom and Tottington.

Culture, however, means different things to different people. I would argue strongly that Gigg Lane, the historical home of Bury FC, is both a cultural and heritage asset. It is central to the identity of thousands of my constituents. Away from sport, Bury currently has no relatively large-scale outdoor stadium venue where concerts and other live events can be held. Sport, community, history and culture are intimately entwined.

The opportunities to use culture as a means of increasing opportunity and life chances, and supporting the local economy, must be supported nationally and locally. The Co-op theatre in Ramsbottom is a rare surviving example of a music hall from the 1870s. It is of national significance because of the original interior features still in situ. Most of the building has not been used for years, but its rebirth will be transformational for everyone who lives and works in the town. The building inspires and is loved by locals. If the community, together with the public and private sector, can work in partnership to deliver a unique cultural asset for everyone to enjoy, the residents of Bury North will see the power of culture to transform lives on their very doorstep.

5.38 pm

**Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op):** May I take this moment to welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) back to her rightful place on the Front Bench?

It is good news, if it is true, that there will be £400 million more for the creative industries in the Budget. Most of the funding, of course, will be going to the culture recovery fund, which is overdue, as the period that the fund was supposed to help organisations has stretched considerably. However, I particularly welcome new funding for community cultural projects, as local creative groups

[Tracy Brabin]

are often incubators of talent that go on to be world-beating creators of content, but of course the devil is in the detail.

After speaking to friends in the sector, there are a couple of points I would like to raise for the Minister to answer. Will this extra money mean that there will be a hike in VAT before the sector can get back on its feet? Will this money be recouped from local authorities, which have already had their budgets cruelly cut? They are some of the biggest providers of culture in our communities. Also, insurance is particularly important for our festivals and touring shows. Glastonbury has already said that it is unable to take the risk, and Download will not be back until 2022 because of the pandemic. Now that there is a “not before” date in place for festivals, insurance is the last stumbling block for organisers.

Dance, drama and music students have had their training cruelly interrupted. They have no chance to work together in ensembles or to put on a play. These students, the new talent, have been poorly served, with some drama schools shrugging their shoulders and saying there is nothing more they can do, but with the students still being forced to pay the eye-watering cost of their training. Can the Minister tell us whether any work is under way with colleagues in the Department for Education to support bringing this future generation through? This is being particularly keenly felt by working-class students, who could fall by the wayside without the high-quality and thorough training offered by our country’s exceptional conservatoires. The playwright James Graham commented after the Golden Globes:

“Daniel Kaluuya wrote a play aged 9, breakout role @royalcourt. John Boyega at @TheatrePeckham. @JoshOConnor15 at @BristolOldVic, Emma Corrin in student theatre.”

Talent does not just arrive; it has to be grown. The ecosystem of the arts must nurture diverse voices, and if the Government want to level up the country, I would like to know where the plan is to ensure that those traditionally further from opportunity get support and training. We have also heard about the workforce, and I will not go into that again, but if the speculation is true that a rise in national insurance for the self-employed is imminent when so many have not had a penny of support, that is a step that will feel particularly cruel. Finally, can the Minister give us an update on the creative passport arrangements that will support our tourism sector so that it goes on to flourish?

5.41 pm

**Peter Gibson** (Darlington) (Con) [V]: It is a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin).

Darlington is the birthplace of the railways, and, as I have highlighted to the House on many occasions, we are the historic home of Locomotion No. 1 and the location of the world heritage site at Skerne Bridge, the oldest surviving railway bridge in the world, both of which have featured on our nation’s £5 notes. The Friends of the Stockton and Darlington Railway have received £35,000 of culture recovery funds and the A1 Steam Locomotive Trust, which builds new steam trains, has received over £150,000.

Darlington is not just about trains, however. Our heritage goes beyond the steel in our railways and the bricks in our stunning Victorian town centre. Today, Darlington is home to a vibrant community of artistic excellence at sites such as the Forum Music Centre and the Hippodrome, which received £106,000 and £1 million respectively from the culture recovery fund, and the town has recently been awarded its second purple flag for 2021. Sadly, these sites have been among the worst affected over the past year, with extended periods of closure since last March.

I am proud of the decision taken by the Government to protect Darlington’s cultural sector and the jobs that it provides to my constituents. Through the coronavirus job retention stream, the kickstart scheme and the self-employment income support scheme, thousands of jobs and livelihoods have been protected, and Government-guaranteed business loans, lockdown grants and discretionary grants have supported many businesses in the entertainment sector. Right across the country, the Government’s exceptional £1.57 billion culture recovery fund has supported our much loved cultural sector. More than 3,000 organisations across the country have benefited from access to the fund, supporting more than 70,000 jobs nationwide, with many more freelancers and jobs in the supply chain industries also benefiting.

Last week, our culture sector listened intently as the Prime Minister announced our road map out of lockdown. I welcome the provisions in the road map that will unlock our culture and entertainment sector, and I look forward to seeing our cinemas, museums and theatres opening right across Darlington from 17 May. I look forward to visiting the Head of Steam Museum, attending events at the Hippodrome or taking in some live music. It is thanks to the hard work of those in the culture sector and the work of the DCMS team to support them that we can look forward in this way.

5.44 pm

**Barbara Keeley** (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab) [V]: In the past year, we have seen many hundreds of thousands of people out of work, with many of them no longer having jobs to return to. We have seen 123,000 people tragically die due to covid-19. While today we are debating the economic impacts of the virus, we cannot forget that lockdowns and social distancing were the correct thing to do to prevent this tragic death toll from being even higher. Over the coming months, we need to continue to protect lives, but it is not a zero-sum game where we need to abandon public health precautions in order to reopen the economy. We need an approach that protects livelihoods while also saving lives.

The need for support to protect livelihoods is particularly acute in the cultural and entertainment industries, which have had to close their doors for much of the past year. Even the most optimistic plans for reopening mean that they will not be back at full capacity until towards the end of this year or later. In the absence of support, many organisations have turned to the internet to keep working. Livestream performances, ranging from classical music to opera and plays, have been an invaluable lifeline not only to performers but to people staying at home during lockdown.

Bizarrely, orchestras putting on livestream performances are not eligible for the tax relief they would receive if they had attendees in person. The Government’s guidance

on orchestra tax relief says that it can only be claimed if there are some attendees in person, but that is clearly impossible at a time when audiences cannot attend. Can the Minister confirm that the Government will address that in the Budget, to ensure that orchestras get the financial support they need when they livestream without an audience present in person? While I am talking about live music, we cannot let the hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) get away with claiming the best brass band in the world, when we have the award-winning Eccles Borough Band and the Cadishead Public Band.

In the Budget tomorrow, we need support for the people who work in the cultural industries. I have heard from many of my constituents who work in MediaCity in Salford and have found themselves excluded from the Government's financial support so far. The nature of their work means that many of them are on a mix of self-employed work and short-term pay-as-you-earn contracts, and they do not get support through the self-employment income support scheme. Unless they were under contract at the end of March last year, they did not get furlough support. A year into this crisis, they still have not had any support, and it is worse for people at the start of their careers, when they have not had time to build up any reserves.

Can the Minister tell us whether the Budget tomorrow will finally contain support for those people who have been excluded so far, so that they can get through the remaining months of this pandemic without facing further financial hardship? The Minister may say that he cannot reveal measures ahead of the Budget, but that rule seems to have been comprehensively abandoned.

5.47 pm

**Ben Everitt** (Milton Keynes North) (Con): If we are talking about live music in Lancashire, I am sure that my hon. Friends the Members for Bury South (Christian Wakeford) and for Hyndburn (Sara Britcliffe) would never forgive me if I did not take this opportunity to mention the Lancashire Hotpots, but it is Milton Keynes that concerns me most and, of course, Britain in general.

Britain is home to world-class cultural, arts and heritage organisations—in fact, world-leading ones; we do not say that enough—and Milton Keynes is no exception. With live music venues The Stables and Unit Nine, visitor experience attractions MK City Discovery Centre and Gulliver's Land, and arts venues such as MK Theatre and MK Gallery, there is no shortage of fantastic venues that support incredible talent. I could spend the rest of the debate talking about their huge impact locally and further afield.

Venues in Milton Keynes cannot wait to throw open their doors again, and I am pleased that the road map has given much-needed clarity to all of us about when we will get there, but I know from the businesses that contact me that, despite that clear end in sight, many in the sector are worried that they just will not make it until the end of spring. I stood in this place only last week to call for councils to do more to release the Government funds that they have to support local businesses, and still, this afternoon, emails were coming into my office from businesses that have asked and asked about how they access these funds from the council and have been told to wait or to look elsewhere.

There is an end in sight. We all know that when those doors open again and the cultural and entertainment venues are back in business and part of the vibe that we have in Milton Keynes and in Britain, that will be the downhill journey on this great mountain of covid. The Government have released billions in funding through the culture recovery fund and billions more in the additional restrictions grant. The sector should now be given the confidence it needs, with councils releasing the funds that are desperately required for venues to reopen safely later in the spring. With the right financial support in place, with a concise and clear road map guided by the data, and with everyone doing their bit in keeping cases down, we can be confident that the cultural and entertainment sectors can bounce back stronger than ever.

5.50 pm

**Alex Davies-Jones** (Pontypridd) (Lab) [V]: It is a privilege to be called to speak in this debate, and it is fantastic to see my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) back in her rightful place. I will keep my comments brief, but in doing so I hope to catch up on a number of key issues that are close to my heart and the hearts of many in Pontypridd and beyond.

Colleagues may be aware—given my determined and committed approach to raising issues around wrestling, they certainly should be—that I am co-chair, along with my good friend the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mark Fletcher), of the all-party parliamentary group on wrestling. It has rapidly become clear to me that the coronavirus pandemic has had a huge impact on sectors such as wrestling that fall between governance gaps. Wrestling is unique in that it is classified by some as a sport and by others as a performative entertainment. The situation is complicated further given that the industry currently has no formal regulatory or governing body. I appreciate that the Government are taking small steps towards engagement—indeed, I was pleased to meet the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the hon. Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston), today to discuss these issues—but I sincerely hope that specific consideration will be given to industries such as wrestling that have fallen through the gaps in both financial support and coronavirus regulations guidance.

I am afraid that those in the wrestling industry are not the only ones who have been losing out. The situation across the UK's culture and entertainment sector as a whole is currently pretty dire. We have all heard time and again about the millions of people who have been excluded from the Government's financial support packages, and freelance workers in our creative sectors have been particularly badly hit. People who have dedicated their lives to their craft have had to cope with the devastating blow of being forgotten, belittled and ignored. I sincerely hope that the Chancellor takes the opportunity in his Budget to make amends and put things right.

The Minister knows and, I believe, shares my concerns about the viability of creatives being able to tour and travel across Europe for work purposes. My hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) mentioned her brass band, and the hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) claimed that he had the world's best brass band, but I am going to blow my own trumpet and declare that in fact I have the best brass band in my patch: the Cory Band from Rhondda Cynon

[Alex Davies-Jones]

Taff currently holds the official title. Without any ability to avoid costly administrative fees, bands such as the Cory Band will be limited in their ability to thrive and spread the word of the UK's proud musical heritage to our friends on the continent. That said, I thank the Minister for his engagement on this topic and sincerely hope that the work of the Department will see a viable solution put in place to support those who have been impacted.

The situation could be different. In Wales, the Welsh Labour Government's £63 million culture recovery fund has been a lifeline for those facing a tough time, and I sincerely hope that the UK Government will follow their lead in prioritising support for the cultural and entertainment sectors. Need I remind the Minister that this sector, which is so central both to the recovery of our country's economy and to individual people's wellbeing, deserves our utmost attention and support? We all know that actions speak louder than words, and the cultural and entertainment sectors and those working in them desperately need to see positive change before it is too late.

5.53 pm

**Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones). I want to cover three areas in this important debate on the eve of the Budget: the BBC; protecting the jobs of journalists, on behalf of the National Union of Journalists; and the charitable sector in my own constituency.

Those employed in the cultural and entertainment sector account for a large proportion of the 3 million still excluded from Government support. These sectors provide essential services. They include the charities distributing hot meals to those self-isolating. They also include investigative journalists uncovering the truth, which we really need to know, behind many of the stories about covid. Freelance journalists have been particularly badly impacted during the pandemic. In a time of national crisis, the value of the BBC has never been more important. It has been an outstanding and authoritative news source, providing information as well as educational programming to give parents home-schooling support. Indeed, the BBC is the heart of the UK's creative economy, but what is not widely appreciated is that it generates £2 for the wider economy for every £1 spent, which sustains thousands of independent production companies and suppliers up and down the country.

Sadly, the Government failed to honour their manifesto promise to keep the free TV licence for the over-75s. Their decision instead to transfer responsibility to the BBC was, in my view, outrageous. Not only has that resulted in a direct attack on the entitlements of elderly people, but the £500 million annual hit to the BBC budget is resulting in programming cuts and more than 500 jobs being lost from BBC news production.

The National Union of Journalists has highlighted the damaging impact of axing investigative reporting such as the award-winning "Inside Out" programme. Will the Minister ensure that, in the next round of charter renewal negotiations, we have a transparent negotiation that ensures that the BBC has the resources it needs to invest in improving news and political coverage?

I also want to mention the charitable sector, and the excellent East Durham Trust in my constituency. Ministers still have not confirmed whether they will extend the deadline to give charities more time to use this much-needed funding. I am grateful for the support of the Chair of the Select Committee, but I would like the Minister to respond in a timely way to allow the charitable sector to plan accordingly. These things—

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** Order. I am sorry, but we have to leave it there.

5.56 pm

**Marco Longhi** (Dudley North) (Con) [V]: My constituents and I are very lucky to have many rich cultural institutions on our doorstep: the Black Country Living Museum; Dudley zoo and castle; Wren's Nest site of special scientific interest; the Canal and River Trust; nature reserves; our microbreweries and pubs; our bowling greens and parks—the list really does go on. The past year has undoubtedly had a huge impact in many ways on this sector, but with its resilience and Government support, such as the culture recovery fund and the zoo animals fund, our museums, zoos and entertainment venues will once again see us all flocking back to them.

I am proud of the Black Country Living Museum in Dudley for playing such a pivotal role in our recovery from the pandemic by playing host to a major vaccination hub in our area. I have been volunteering there weekly, and I have seen at first hand the work and support of museum and NHS staff and volunteers. The museum is due to begin major works on its capital development, with a £30 million investment in the local community made possible by support from funders including the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport's culture capital kickstart fund via the culture recovery fund, the National Lottery Heritage Fund, and the Black Country local enterprise partnership.

Dudley zoo is another fantastic organisation in the constituency that has benefited from financial support to help sustain it throughout the period of closure. I have been in contact with its director, Derek Grove, who has led a fantastic team to ensure that, despite the closure, the zoo's animals have been looked after, with vital conservation work continued. But despite the Government's generous support, finances, particularly for zoos such as Dudley's, have been left far too tight for comfort.

The Budget tomorrow is a crucial chance for the Government to continue their historic and world-leading investment in our cultural and entertainment sectors. Our cultural and heritage venues are much more than just places for us to visit with families and friends on a day out; they are places of work and vital contributors to our local economies, conservation and biodiversity, and they will all play a big part in our recovery from the pandemic.

I hope and look forward to hearing how the Chancellor and our Government will further support our cultural and entertainment organisations throughout the rest of the pandemic and beyond, to ensure not just a sharp bounce back but their longevity into a successful future.

5.59 pm

**James Sunderland** (Bracknell) (Con): This is a super opportunity to represent the people of Bracknell as we recover from covid. Some headlines, if I may: the £500 million film and TV production restart scheme; one year of business rates holiday worth over £10 billion plus temporary reduction of VAT; 200 independent cinemas across England being supported with £16 million of grants; Sport England announces £220 million of emergency funding for grassroots clubs. The list goes on. But we can, of course, do better. I really welcome the news from the Prime Minister that the road map will allow outdoor sports to resume from 29 March; the light at the end of the tunnel is almost with us, and that is very welcome, but I urge the Government to consider pushing this date to the left wherever possible.

Bracknell is blessed with some stunning golf courses of the highest quality, and it has been a real source of frustration to my constituents to see their sport lumped in with others. It is an outdoor sport and we can separate very easily, so let us get the courses open quickly, please. The same applies to grassroots sports, to tennis and to gymnasiums. Let us get our leisure activities up and running.

Elite football has kept many of us sane for the last few months, myself included. However, those not in the upper echelons of the elite have struggled immensely and are on their last legs. Without big-money television deals, non-league football relies on ticket sales to be viable. A year down the line, clubs have are still being asked to wait until 17 May before getting the fans back into their stadiums. That is just too late. These clubs also need grants, not loans. It is essential that these lifeblood clubs are properly supported right across the community.

As for entertainment in the round, it is imperative that our pubs and restaurants are opened quickly, as well as cinemas, theatres and the wedding industry. The live music sector contributed £4.5 billion to the economy in 2019, supporting 210,000 jobs and providing £1.6 billion in VAT receipts. The sector is too valuable to stay closed. Let us please get it open. Why not an extension of the 5% VAT rate for ticket sales? Why not a Government-backed insurance scheme, giving the industry the confidence to book shows? Why not an extension of business rates relief beyond April 2021?

The UK has a really proud motorsports industry that is essential for jobs and livelihoods, and is one of our best exports. Aside from the flagship Formula 1 series, it is imperative that the UK gets its round of the world rally championship back to our shores. May I please commend having a round of the rally in Northern Ireland in 2022? The infrastructure in place. The political benefits are absolute: the Union; protocols; Stormont; reconciliation; legacy. Let us please get it done. DCMS, please find some money.

6.2 pm

**John Spellar** (Warley) (Lab): I want to refocus the debate slightly—on to the public, and the fundamental fact that the public want to get out and have fun. They have been cooped up for the best part of a year, even though many have still been going to work. Now, as spring approaches, they want to get out and enjoy themselves, and good luck to them, I say. They want to get out, let their hair down a bit and enjoy themselves. I would say

that they want to get back to merrie England, if I could get that past the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady); I hope he understands that I encompass the good folk of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in that. This applies across all age groups.

We have to reset the balance of the debate. Of course, health concerns are crucial, but so are jobs, businesses and the economy. Like many of their customers, a large part of the workforce are young, and the closure of the industry is one of the drivers of the huge spike in youth unemployment. Unemployment leads not only to deprivation, but to sickness and premature death. Jobs, jobs, jobs really matter. The balance has to shift from whether we open up the sector and the related sectors of hospitality, sport and exercise to how we open them up. I shall coin a phrase, if I may: be driven by the data and not by dates.

**Sir John Hayes:** The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about jobs, but of course this is also important for socialisation and community—for people getting together. People are social animals, and he is right that socialisation is critical to individual wellbeing and communal health.

**John Spellar:** The right hon. Gentleman is right about that. If the vaccine certificate will assist, the Government should get a move on, rather than using the languid approach they are taking at the moment.

The danger has been that the debate can be posed in binary terms, pitching hospitals against hospitality, one a matter of life and death, with the other able to be painted as more discretionary and even frivolous. But that is a balance that has to be struck; that is what government is about—that is its function. Currently, millions of people are unemployed, furloughed or laid off. Many of them are freelance workers who are slipping through the gaps and desperate for support. Hundreds of thousands of family businesses, their hopes, dreams, and life's work and savings sunk into them, are at risk every month of going under and are just hanging on, and that is quite apart from the vast ecosystem that supports them and depends on them.

The loss of this sector would also leave a huge gap in our national life. The cultural and entertainment sector is one in which our nation excels. It is part of what makes living worth while and Britain special. We do not live by bread alone, but give us roses too. Our quality of life would be seriously weakened if we had the withering away of the sector—not just the cultural sector with the international and national centres, but many local theatres, music centres, clubs and pubs. Apart from being good in themselves, they are the crucial supply chain for the sector; no one started in the music industry by playing the O2. This is about keeping our communities thriving. We talk about town centres and the high streets, which have taken a bit hit with the decline of physical retail, but take out culture, entertainment and hospitality and they will wither and die. This sector is a huge draw not just for tourists but for inward investors and the skilled mobile international workforce. Let's get this industry back to work.

6.6 pm

**Paul Bristow** (Peterborough) (Con) [V]: My city is fortunate to have not one or even two theatres, but three. Live performance was an integral part of life in

[Paul Bristow]

Peterborough before the virus struck and, thanks to the support available from the Government, it will be again. Our theatres were really struggling last summer—I do not pretend that times are rosy now, but things did look bleak—and I wrote to the Secretary of State setting out the problems the arts faced in Peterborough.

For the New theatre, in particular, which relied entirely on its own box office receipts, those problems were closing in. Given the troubled history of that venue, it would have been a tragedy to have lost the New theatre just after it was revitalised and was enjoying success. I congratulate the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) on her support for the wrestling industry. As the vice-chair of her all-party group, she might be aware that the New theatre was the venue for my pro wrestling debut last year, before lockdown. On the other side of our city is the Key theatre, which is, as its name suggests, absolutely key to Peterborough's identity. It was an important part of my childhood and I want it to be an important part of the childhoods of both my daughters and of countless other young people in Peterborough. A short trip outside the centre takes us to Bretton, where we have The Cresset, which is the perfect example of a successful multi-purpose venue.

To have three theatres in a small working city such as Peterborough is a cultural achievement. We are proud to have them and they are crucial to our plans for future growth and regeneration. All three theatres were under severe financial pressure last year. The Key theatre is owned by the council, which provided support, but that left the other two, so I was thrilled that the New theatre and The Cresset received nearly £900,000 from this Government's cultural recovery fund. Overall, Peterborough got £1.1 million, helping not just our theatres, but wonderful organisations such as Peterborough Sings!, a musical education charity that runs four choirs and lots of outreach work.

I am incredibly grateful for this action to save our cultural life, but, as with any financial support, while covid restrictions continue the money will last only for a finite period. That is why I am so pleased to hear that there may be £400 million available for the sector. I know that the Minister will hear pleas from across the country, but I assure him that there is no more deserving place than Peterborough. I also hope that Ministers will do what they can to facilitate a speedy return to normality. Our theatres do not want bail-outs; they want to perform.

6.9 pm

**Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): I will just say to the right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar) that art knows no boundaries or borders.

The creative sector is the life and soul of Glasgow North, and it has been a huge privilege to represent its talent of all kinds—established an up-and-coming artists of every genre and generation imaginable—and venues to suit them all, from the small Hug and Pint on Great Western Road to the famous Stand comedy club, Óran Mór and Cottiers, and across the city there are even more world-class venues. But they were some of the first to close, and they will be the last to reopen.

Artists have been some of the hardest hit by the restrictions of the pandemic. To be a performing artist or work in the creative industry is not a hobby; it is a

way of life and a way of making a living. We have heard that throughout the debate, and I have heard it from so many of my constituents. Its contribution is not just economic; the cultural and social value cannot be measured. Art helps us to understand the world around us, and that will be only even more important post pandemic.

I reflected recently that live performances are definitely one part of the old normal that I have missed the most. I am looking forward to them coming back in the months to come. But that return will not be by magic. Performers do not just get up on stage and perform for the first time. As the right hon. Member for Warley said, no one began their career playing the O2; they need to rehearse and prepare, and they need physical space and support to do that. They need a supply chain behind them of sound and lighting, supplies and materials, but again many of my constituents in those sectors have been hit hard. Some of that is to do with the models of employment and contracts that have been part of the industry to allow flexibility and creativity, but that means they are some of the people who have been most likely to find themselves excluded from the Government's support packages. If they end up on universal credit, the uncertainty about what even that paltry income might look like only exacerbates the situation. Compare that to what a universal basic income might have looked like, or even the certainty that the German furlough has provided.

Throughout the pandemic, there have been—even in difficult circumstances—real achievements. I pay tribute to the incredible virtual Celtic Connections festival that took place, and I know from friends and constituents that online tutoring and performance will undoubtedly be part of the new normal. There have been collaborations of different kinds of creativity, too: I think of House of McCallum whiskies, based in Glasgow North, whose McPink blended Scotch features a design by artist Ashley Cook on the packaging. Our craft and boutique spirit distillers and producers lend their own creativity to the arts sector and need support, too.

We welcome what support the Government in the UK and in Scotland have been able to provide, but they need to live up to the rhetoric we are hearing from Ministers today with support going forward. Certainty is what is needed to help get our artists back on their feet and back on the road—and that is crucial for artists and audiences alike.

6.12 pm

**Andy Carter** (Warrington South) (Con) [V]: It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady). I want to use the short time I have, first, to recognise the resilience, innovation and ingenuity that exists in the culture and entertainment sector. The sector has a key part to play in shaping society post pandemic. It is this sector that makes us feel good. It is a fast-growing sector and a key export driver. This is the sector where we find memorable experiences in our town centres and on our high streets.

I have heard from many who work in the arts in Warrington South—musicians, producers and camera operators—who have welcomed the Prime Minister's road map to returning our world to some form of normality, but there is no denying that people who worked in the sector have been particularly badly hit.

Some have been unable to access support schemes because they were freelance. So I acknowledge the efforts that the Government have gone to in order to get people back into work in the film and TV sector with the unique restart scheme. It has allowed TV production to begin again, including on British dramas such as “Peaky Blinders”, which is being filmed just down the road from me here.

The Government have also stepped in to support commercial radio and local newspapers with enhanced advertising campaigns. That sector saw massive drops in ad spending, so we must be cautious about the impact of the legislation on products high in fat, salt, and/or sugar and the pace at which that is implemented. I also ask the Minister to look at how the Government can support smaller independent media companies such as Warrington Worldwide and *The Cheshire Times*. Because they are not part of large media organisations, they have not seen the level of ad spend that others have benefited from.

As the chair of the all-party parliamentary media group, I have supported calls from across the sector for an advertising tax credit. Local communities benefit from a vibrant local media, and a vibrant local media can do wonders for a local economy. The culture recovery fund has made a huge difference to many organisations, including the Parr Hall and Pyramid Arts Centre in Warrington. This is a tough, challenging time, though, for the supply chain in that sector.

To conclude, for many young people—and I include you in this, Mr Deputy Speaker—the August bank holiday heralds Creamfields, one of the most important dance music festivals. We have welcomed thousands from across the UK to Warrington South in previous years. Creamfields benefits the hotels, the bars and the taxi businesses in my community, and I am glad to see that it is already a provisional sell-out.

I want, finally, to highlight to the Minister some of the smaller organisations and voluntary groups, such as the Lymm festival and St Margaret’s community foundation in Latchford, which have received £15,000 in funding to keep their doors open, and we have a range of assets being supported by the communities fund. The Budget is a crucial chance for the Government to continue their historic and world-leading investment in our culture and entertainment sector, and I am sure the Minister will join me in urging the Chancellor to do everything he can to continue to support this vital sector.

6.15 pm

**Emma Hardy** (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab) [V]: In 2017, Hull was the city of culture, and that legacy and love of culture lives on. I have sorely missed the magic of a live music event, with the buzz from being in a crowded room and listening to a band I love. Surely, we all just love a good night out, and culture brings that colour to our lives. As the revolutionary change to the way we work takes hold and more businesses realise that remote working means they are not tied to any geographical area, Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle will have a bright and bold future. Many people will learn what I already know, which is that not only is the cost of living low, with really friendly people and full-fibre broadband, but the city is culturally rich and vibrant. Living here really does mean you can have your cake and eat it.

Hull is home to the Adelphi, which is an iconic music venue that supports new and upcoming talent, often having offered huge names their first chance to perform. In Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle, there is the Polar Bear, which has been saved, thanks to a crowdfunding campaign, and the Welly and O’Rileys, which have hosted bands such as Oasis, Pulp and U2. The constituency also contains the recently opened 3,500-seat Bonus arena and conference centre. We really are one of the country’s best kept secrets.

While the £1.57 billion support package for the arts was welcome, it seemed to focus too much on saving buildings and not enough on saving jobs. We need a plan to support live music. Locally, fundraisers are already happening, and I would urge Members to go and look at the iconic limited edition print that the charity Adelphi is offering right now.

We do not just have live music here. A few weeks ago, I introduced Parliament to the two loggerhead rescue turtles, Sensa and Mabouche, which have found their forever home at The Deep. I did this to highlight the problems that The Deep is having in accessing the zoo recovery fund. We want this fund to require organisations to demonstrate the financial impact of covid on their incomes, rather than, as at the moment, having to be on the verge of running out of reserves before they can get access to it. Sadly, The Deep will be one of the last things to reopen, but, as we found out, the daily animal care costs £5,500. I hope the Chancellor will offer something to important zoos and aquariums such as The Deep.

I cannot talk about culture without very quickly talking about pubs because, let us be honest, on a night out they are often where we start and often where we end up as well, and they are a quintessential part of British culture. Landlords have spent a fortune making their pubs covid-secure and they have done everything they have been asked to do, and now they need something back. They need the VAT cut, business rate holiday and furlough to continue. In my last few seconds, let me make my most important point: when this lockdown ends, please get it right and do not put us back into another lockdown again.

6.18 pm

**Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): At the start of the pandemic, I of course knew what a wonderful cultural background we had in Blaydon constituency, but I had no idea just how many people there were and how rich a cultural landscape there was. There are so many people engaged across music, events production, the arts and cultural activities in my constituency, and it has been wonderful to meet them and to learn about their respective industries and the issues they face. Of course, the creative industries in our region, like elsewhere, are interwoven. From freelancers to small businesses, they all form a complex web, relying on the health of the collective to flourish and function as an industry. So the pandemic, once it hit, hit people in this sector hard. The events industry shut down overnight, galleries closed and music venues shut. Sadly, none of them has opened up since.

Things have moved on since my initial conversations with them, but some of the people and businesses in my constituency have been badly affected. Mandylights, a lighting and creative design business for large-scale events, tells me that the industry still requires continued support.

[Liz Twist]

The RNB Group, which runs corporate events, told me that it has lost more than £1.5 million in revenue. Claire Malcolm, chief executive of New Writing North, a well-respected development agency for writing and reading in the north, highlighted the cultural recovery funding. She applauds that funding from DCMS, but notes that it is focused on supporting buildings, performance, and gallery-based activities. There are hidden issues about smaller and non-building based organisations not getting access to that recovery support. The work that those smaller organisations do often directly supports freelance artists, other creative practitioners, and technical support companies. Last year, New Writing North provided work for 190 freelancers.

The north-east has a proud history of cultural investment: the Angel of the North, Baltic, the Sage—there are so many to mention. I am pleased that work is going on in the north-east culture partnership, bringing together all 12 local authorities in the north-east, and I urge the Minister to look at that. The pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on women, and the future looks bleak for many dance teachers and freelancers who are women. On top of that, the visa issue for those who work or hope to work in the EU is a problem. The Government need to support freelancers. Getting the creative industries back to pre-pandemic growth is essential.

6.21 pm

**Robbie Moore** (Keighley) (Con): With the road map to releasing us from lockdown now published, there cannot be many sectors that are breathing a bigger sigh of relief than the cultural sector. For cultural and entertainment businesses, lockdowns and restrictions have put limits on exactly the thing they thrive off. For example, the Exchange arts centre in Keighley is one of many fantastic entertainment venues in my constituency that give local musicians a chance to showcase their talents in front of enthusiastic crowds. Inevitably, limits on social contact have had a detrimental impact, with the pandemic forcing venues to cancel events and close their doors. Financial support has, of course, been welcome, but for businesses such as the Exchange, nothing can truly compare to a busy bar and a live performance on stage.

Lockdown has opened up many new opportunities and ways of doing things. For example, a band called Deco is trending on social media at the moment. They have released some awesome mash-ups of contemporary music and 80s pop, with their recordings taking place on Zoom. I urge the Minister to take a listen to their “Wonderwall” and “Smalltown Boy” mash-up.

Everyone in the music industry is desperate for us to get back to normal, and the same can be said for many businesses in the tourism industry, of which there are many in my constituency. People come from near and far to enjoy the Brontë country, or to take a ride on the Keighley and Worth valley railway. The pandemic has hit the tourism sector hard. When tourist attractions such as the Keighley and Worth valley railway or the Ilkley toy museum are thriving, that has a positive impact on many businesses across Keighley and Ilkley. If people visit those attractions, they also go to the pubs, restaurants and cafes. If pubs and restaurants get more demand, so will local breweries such as Timothy Taylor’s, Wishbone brewery, or Ilkley brewery in my constituency. Accommodation

venues such as Upwood holiday park in the Worth valley can then accommodate those visitors. I cannot exaggerate the importance of cultural and tourism attractions to our local economy. When those venues lose revenue, so do many other businesses. That is why Government support for these industries has been so welcome over the past year, but I must continue to urge the Government to ensure that, as we reopen our cultural and entertainment economy, support continues until restrictions are removed in their entirety, as these industries rely on ticket sales, seats being filled and bars being full. Until these venues are given the full green light to open, running profitably or even at a break-even level will continue to be a challenge for many.

6.25 pm

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD) [V]: The arts and culture sector has been devastated by covid and, throughout the pandemic, it has been an afterthought, yet it is crucial to the UK’s recovery not just for its economic contribution, but for its importance to all our mental health. In my Bath constituency, arts and culture are an integral part of our local economy, contributing to the huge attraction that the city offers to visitors from around the world.

Of course, I recognise that the Government have done something. The culture recovery fund was a source of relief and I am very pleased for the Roman baths, Bath Abbey and Cleveland pools, which got welcome funding, some of which will go towards meeting the loss of revenue. However, the reality for many other venues and organisations is that this fund came too late and was spread too thinly. The Government certainly do not understand the need of the creative workforce, many of whom are freelancers. They have not been eligible for the self-employed income support scheme and feel abandoned. In tomorrow’s Budget, the Chancellor must look at adopting general support packages to give targeted support to those working in the creative sectors.

Live music has been particularly hard hit. Venues have not been able to open for any meaningful length of time throughout last year and the beginning of this year and could now be months behind the rest of the country. Venues such as The Bell in Bath are looking for innovative ways to maintain social distancing and will be live-streaming gigs online and to other parts of the building, and I congratulate it on its efforts. The music industry will need support from Government to see it through until 21 June and I urge Ministers to support a Government-backed insurance scheme that will provide much needed confidence for the sector.

Museums and galleries will have to wait until May before they can open again. Public Health England states that there is no evidence that they are sites of transmission. Art galleries such as the Holburne Museum in Bath have shown that it would be possible to open safely, and it makes no sense that they are not treated the same as the retail sector, which will be able to open five weeks earlier. At a time when museums are suffering from months without visitors, reduced staff and budgets, the Government’s road map is leaving them very vulnerable and reinforces the sense that other industries are being treated differently. I ask the Government to look again at their plans to allow museums and galleries to reopen as part of step 2.

The arts and culture is vital not only for our economy, but for our wellbeing. Its damage is damage to all of us.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** The wind-ups will begin at 6.44 pm.

6.27 pm

**Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con):** As many Members across the House have said, fewer sectors have been harder hit by the coronavirus pandemic than our cultural and entertainment sector, which is an absolutely vital driver for our incredibly important hospitality sector in North West Durham.

First, I thank the Minister for the culture recovery fund and heritage emergency fund money that has come the way of North West Durham. We have seen over £500,000 for Durham and Darlington music education hub. Ushaw College has had over £500,000 in total. Durham Wildlife Trust has had £45,000. The Weardale Museum, a really important new local venture, has had £45,000 as well, but the largest support for the sector has come through the furlough scheme and the grants for local pubs and clubs that have really made a difference to so many businesses and cultural venues in North West Durham.

At the moment, we are seeing a huge investment in Durham from Durham County Council, but very little of that is coming to my constituency. In fact, in a recent survey I did, 91% of my constituents said that they are very unhappy with the fact that Durham County Council is spending £63 million on leisure services across the county, but there is hardly anything for my constituents.

That is in sharp contrast with local people themselves, who are putting their shoulders to the wheel. I think particularly of David, who runs The Roxy in Leadgate, a really important former cinema and then bingo hall that he is trying to rejuvenate. I urge the Minister to ask his colleagues whether it would be possible to visit David, because it is a fantastic project. We have some superb local bands, including the Bearpark and Esh Colliery Band, and some superb local institutions, such as the Weardale Adventure Centre, which has missed out on the culture recovery fund. I urge the Minister to have a word with the Chancellor ahead of the Budget tomorrow, because those rural outdoor education settings are so important.

Me and my hon. Friends the Members for Darlington (Peter Gibson), for Bishop Auckland (Dehenna Davison) and for Sedgefield (Paul Howell) have a bid to get the Weardale railway going again. It is a really important heritage site, connecting so many of our cultural and entertainment sectors. I hope that the Minister will use his good offices to help us lobby the Department for Transport to get that over the line. Finally, I would like to commend the many people in my local area who work in this sector. It is vital now and for our recovery, and I hope that the Minister will have some positive words with the Chancellor to help the sector recover and grow.

6.31 pm

**Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con):** Beginner's luck refers to the supposed phenomenon of novices experiencing disproportionate success. You can therefore imagine my delight, Mr Deputy Speaker, when my first lobbying letter signed by Norfolk and Suffolk MPs asking for money for the arts and culture sector resulted in £1.57 billion coming forward. I have consoled myself

that that was rather a good bit of timing, but there is a serious message here. In Norfolk, arts and culture are embedded in our communities, with a thriving network of venues, from small community art spaces to large world-renowned venues. The closures due to covid-19 have had a devastating impact on those cultural venues, and while social distancing remains in place, their inability to reopen properly will continue to stunt their recovery. We know this, and that is why the Government's vaccination programme, recovery road map and sector support have been so welcome.

I only have to look at my constituency, North Norfolk, to see how the culture recovery fund has been a lifeline and supported many of my flagship attractions. Hundreds of thousands of people visit one of the finest heritage railways in the country and I am proud to have the much-loved North Norfolk railway running its steam trains between Sheringham and Holt. It benefited from £360,000, as did the equally culturally rich attractions of Wells Maltings, the Sheringham Little Theatre and our wonderful independent Regal Movieplex cinema in Cromer. I need do no more, Mr Deputy Speaker, than merely suggest that, when you come to North Norfolk for your summer hols—and you are most welcome—you take a trip on the North Norfolk steam railway, and as you return to Sheringham, do enjoy our Little Theatre. But don't forget that you are spoilt for choice, with the productions in Wells and the movies in Cromer. I may even join you.

My picture postcard of North Norfolk has to end here, because where there are winners, there are always those who have painfully missed out. We read that the Chancellor has reserved another £400 million for the arts, and I urge him to earmark some of that to the undeniably important and culturally rich sector that provides so much invaluable learning for our children: the outdoor education sector, which is on its knees. There are many outdoor learning centres in my constituency, and no one can deny that they contribute to culturally enriching children in outdoor learning. Whether it be teaching about local geography or history, they should be eligible as mainstream attractions. For a year now, they have been unable to take bookings: not legally closed, but their customer base forced to not come. The simple inclusion of all outdoor learning centres in the culture recovery fund would start to give them what they desperately need.

6.34 pm

**Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con) [V]:** There are many reasons why Southend should become a city, and I very much look forward to the announcement of the city status competition—bring it on. I have mentioned the great Dame Vera Lynn on a number of occasions in this House. On 26 March, I will be launching a campaign on behalf of her family for a permanent memorial, which will be a fitting tribute to her.

Southend is home to lots of people working in west end theatres, both as actors and behind the scenes. They have been struggling as the majority of theatres have been closed for almost a year. I would welcome support to ensure that theatres can reopen safely and viably.

I am pleased that four businesses in my constituency have benefited from the culture recovery fund: Veritas Entertainment, In the Park Concert, Metal Culture and Old Empire. Two of my constituents in the events industry, one a freelancer and another a director of an

[*Sir David Amess*]

events and consultancy business, have received no financial support since the pandemic began in this country a year ago, so I ask my right hon. Friend the Minister: what is being done to help the many individuals such as those? I have also signed a cross-party letter to the Chancellor asking him to include Government-backed insurance for live events in his Budget tomorrow. I hope that he takes note of that letter and acts appropriately.

The Music Man Project is an inspirational local charity for people with learning difficulties. They have performed at the Royal Albert Hall and the London Palladium and fronted the National Lottery advertising campaign. They will be going to Broadway. The charity would welcome clarity on when it will be allowed to operate in full again.

Southend has a number of excellent festivals and events, including the Leigh Folk Festival, Chalkwell Fair, the Carnival and, at Christmas, the Leigh Lights. Sadly, these all had to be cancelled or moved online last year, which had a knock-on impact on many local businesses. I welcome the announcement that large events will be allowed to take place again this year. The Leigh Regatta, an annual community and charity event organised by the Sea Scouts and the Leigh Lions, raises money for local charities. It was very sad that it was cancelled last year, with a huge loss of income to the charities. More help is needed.

In my constituency there are many wonderful choirs that have struggled to keep going during lockdown. They have used many ingenious methods to keep rehearsing, but they have lost more than a year's revenue from concerts. Again, help is needed.

Finally, many showmen have suffered a catastrophic loss of earnings during the last year, and now stand to lose out over Easter and the spring Bank Holiday. Many showpeople have not been able to apply for grants or funding as they do not have a business address. They have found local councils apparently difficult to deal with because of what they claim is the vague nature of the Government guidelines on funding. So I ask my right hon. Friend the Minister, a fellow Essex Member, to do all he possibly can to support this wonderful sector.

6.37 pm

**Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab) [V]: The pandemic has had a devastating effect on the cultural sectors. Thousands of people's livelihoods and work have been put on hold and, in some cases, ended. Those most affected are from the black and ethnic minority communities and from working-class backgrounds, thus reversing the incredible work of the last 20 years in increasing diversity across these sectors.

The arts and creative sector is not just "The Last Night of the Proms", Glastonbury, the west end theatres, or the pioneering and world-leading TV and film industry, employing world-famous actors and armies of skilled production staff; it is also constituents I know making music with toddlers, puppeteers working in museum education, staff of the now silent community arts centres, dancers and photographers working with disaffected young people, pub bands, club comedians and many, many more. Our world-famous culture stands on the shoulders of people such as these.

Also, our international reputation for skills takes decades of hard work, and if they are not supported, we risk losing them almost overnight. For instance, a constituent who works in the costume department at the Royal Opera House described to me the lifelong training, learning and skills development needed for that role.

It is unfair and unjust that so many have been excluded from any Government covid support. They include people such as my constituent who is a TV director, who became self-employed only in April 2019, but thus missed the arbitrary deadline for the SEISS payments and could not get furloughed. They had to move out of their home and rely on universal credit, and they asked me, "Why am I discriminated against as a taxpaying citizen? It is not my fault that, in my line of work, it makes sense to be self-employed." Why indeed?

In the middle of the pandemic, there was yet another blow—the loss of visa-free travel. It was a body blow for so many performers. A constituent said, "It confirms that Brexit has essentially transformed a tough enough profession into something even more difficult." The Minister for Digital and Culture replied to me on this by saying that the situation was "regrettable". I hope that she can do more than merely express regret.

This debate has shown the enormous role that the arts and creative sectors play in our national life and national economy, so those who work in the arts need to be at the centre of our coronavirus recovery. The Government must do far more to support them as we build back from the impact of the pandemic.

6.40 pm

**Sir Robert Neill** (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con) [V]: The performing arts and live music enrich lives, challenge, entertain, inform and stretch horizons, and all genres are important to us. I declare a particular interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on opera, which brings many of those genres together. Britain's opera scene is thriving, with a massive international reputation at every level, from our great international houses such as Covent Garden right the way down to grassroots opera. I could take up the whole of my speech and beyond by just listing the names of the many small-scale opera companies that bring the genre to people right across the country—giving the lie to the idea that opera is elitist—performing in pubs, clubs and sometimes in prisons, and taking opera into schools, hospitals and care homes.

However, all those companies are struggling. Like in the theatre world, opera artists are overwhelmingly freelancers—71% or so—and they have not all benefited from the subsidies that I am delighted the Government have put in place. The Government have done great work with the culture recovery fund, but it has tended to be skewed towards institutions. We need to support the performers as well, and that goes from the most distinguished soloist right down to the technicians behind the scenes.

I am particularly worried for the young singers, musicians and actors who are trying to make their way at the beginning of their careers, and for the venues that struggle to find insurance, so some Government-backed scheme would be important as theatres reopen. As for medium-sized venues, the Churchill Theatre in Bromley has been supported well by the culture recovery fund, and we are grateful for that. However, support is also required through the tax arrangements for theatre tickets.

Above all, we need to get live music and song performing once again. I hope the Government and Public Health England will look imaginatively at Lord Lloyd Webber's suggestions to get performing arts going again in the west end. The same will apply to our opera companies. A great deal of imagination has been shown—English National Opera performing in the car park at Alexandra Palace and the great community work of Opera Holland Park are just two examples—but if this sector is to survive, flourish and punch at a world-class level, it needs support, and the particular challenges that a complicated art form brings to the table need to be recognised. I hope that the Government will recognise them and that my right hon. Friend the Minister will feed that back not only to the Secretary of State, but to the Chancellor both before the Budget and beyond.

6.43 pm

**Siobhain McDonagh** (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): On St Patrick's Day 2020, the Chancellor stood at the Dispatch Box and made it clear that events companies with rateable properties would not have to pay business rates. However, the decision was discretionary, and by the time it reached local authorities many said that such companies were not eligible. How can a company be required to pay business rates if it is prevented from doing business, and can I ask the Minister: why is this support a lottery by borough?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** I am terribly sorry to the hon. Lady for the short contribution and to all other Members who failed to get in. We now have the wind-ups.

6.44 pm

**Alison McGovern** (Wirral South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), who said a great deal in such a short time. I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

If there is one person who truly appreciates the creative industries in this country, it is the Chancellor of the Exchequer. I know that he has not created employment support schemes that are remotely suitable for the creative industries, and I know that the Tory post-Brexit agreement really screws creative professionals and their ability to get work, but he does love his videographer, and his Instagram account is testament to his adoration of professional photographers. His Twitter feed tells the world how much he appreciates his stylist, and I heard that his Pinterest is extensive. Good luck to him, I say. Some people want substance from their policies, but it is absolutely clear that the Tory party would prefer a shiny veneer.

This debate comes the day before the Budget, which will be a fiscal event that should announce a much-needed, overdue continuation of business support and help for families through this unprecedented time. That should be a given; it should have been done by now. Today's Budget trail, which coincidentally came out the same day as this cross-party general debate, tells us that the Government have found some more cash for the culture recovery fund. Support is welcome, but as Member after Member has said, that funding saves buildings, not jobs. It is a year since many freelancers have had any income at all. As Members have said, freelancers have

been able to apply for some of the funding in Wales and Scotland. Can the Minister say what consideration he has given to a similar approach in England?

What is really lacking is a plan for how our country will earn a living after all we have been through. We need businesses that are fast-growing and offer good-quality jobs, and for that we need the creative and cultural sectors, because they are big and growing. As a whole, DCMS businesses, excluding tourism, contributed £224 billion to the UK in 2018—12% of the economy. Creative businesses exported £36 billion-worth worldwide, and in gross were up 7.5% on the previous year, meaning that growth in the sector is five times that of the British economy as a whole. Important as they are, manufacturing flatlined, and financial services actually fell. Creative businesses are a growing part of our economy.

Tomorrow should be about the future and how we will create the framework to make sure the UK can start growing again. That is why the economic story of creative industries is so important. We have heard from colleagues from right across the country—from Cardiff, Belfast, Barking, Clacton, Coventry, Sheffield, Hull, Batley, Blaydon, Sunderland, Warley, Manchester, Salford, Pontypridd and many more. It is clear from all those contributions that the role of the creative industries and their ability to make life good is not a phenomenon unique to London and the south-east, as the cultural and economic dominance of those areas suggests. We want a plan for the growth of creativity that serves the whole of the UK.

Recent bids to the Government ahead of the spending review showed that West Yorkshire, the west midlands, Liverpool city region and Manchester city region all have cultural plans for their economies, but they are being ignored by the Government, and it is hard to see why. It is not that we want to move cultural and creative economies from London to elsewhere; rather, we want to enable growth where local leaders are clearly crying out for it. The potential is there; we just need to make the most of it.

The glaringly obvious plan that would serve our country so well has been ignored. Too often, the pandemic response has been made up of piecemeal, last-minute decisions. This week is a case in point. People still do not know how long they will be furloughed for and for how long they can be. The industry faces a VAT cliff edge, and freelancers are still uncertain about whether the Budget will finally offer them some much-needed support after a year of hardship.

The truth is that, from listening to the Secretary of State, it was clear from the very beginning that there was no plan to rebalance our economy in the way that city region leaders would like. The Secretary of State gave the game away. All their hotch-potch announcements were aimed at one thing: saving the Crown jewels, as the Secretary of State himself said. It does not matter if someone runs a creative business in Newcastle or Bristol. Unless they run a well-endowed cultural institution that happens to be a short walk from this building, they are nobody's priority, and it shows. The Government have had a year to finesse their policy responses. Membership organisations and trade unions such as the Musicians' Union, Equity and the Writers' Guild all stand ready to help, but too often are ignored.

We heard from Members across the House that every opportunity for creative workers is essential, but the Government actively took away opportunities and made

[Alison McGovern]

matters worse when they failed on their promises to ensure that creative workers would not face unnecessary bureaucracy and barriers to touring in Europe. We heard throughout the debate that that is an essential step. The Government say they want to fix the post-Brexit situation. They simply must make it happen and we have seen too little progress.

That leads me to my final question for Ministers on the gap between reality and what they say. The question I really want to ask the Secretary of State and the Minister here today is this: what do they think their Department is for anymore? When it comes to financial support for creatives, their only job is passing on messages from the Treasury. When it comes to touring after Brexit, the Minister's job is to pass messages on from the Home Office. When it comes to covid, they just pass messages on from the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, or maybe it is now the recently ennobled Brexit negotiator—who really knows? The fact is that the DCMS has been reduced to the Government's equivalent of a voicemail service—they just pass on the message. Let us be honest: too often DCMS Ministers are just not in charge of anything.

There is one final point I really want to make. The Government's road map for unlocking our freedoms gives a series of "not before" dates that help us to plan for the best-case scenario. We all want to be back in theatres, to be part of a crowd again. Many of us long for the day when we can walk down the road to a football stadium and feel the electricity of that first tackle flying in. We long for the chance to hear a singer lift up their microphone and pierce the atmosphere with a ringing sound. Before the pandemic, I thought I was getting old. Now, if somebody, for example my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith), offered me the chance to go for an evening out, you would never get me off the dancefloor. The pandemic has robbed us of not just a fast-growing industry but, as I have said, everything that makes life good. All the things that make life enjoyable are gone, so when we get them back—when we get galleries, festivals, music and art back—I truly hope that the country we choose to build from this point can include everyone in the happiness of creativity, and can give everyone that sense of something beyond the daily grind. I hope the lives we have lived during this covid pandemic make us all the more joyful at having culture back in our life.

6.52 pm

**The Minister for Media and Data (Mr John Whittingdale):**

It is a pleasure to respond to this important debate on behalf of the Government. As the Minister for Digital and Culture, my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Caroline Dinenage) said at the beginning, this has been a hugely challenging year for the entertainment and cultural sectors. Although the vast number of businesses in this country have suffered from the restrictions of lockdown, it is perhaps, as my hon. Friends the Members for Stockton South (Matt Vickers) and for North West Durham (Mr Holden) said, the entertainment and cultural sectors that have been hit among the hardest in the economy.

I would like to thank all those who have participated in the debate. We have had 55 Back-Bench speeches during the course of the debate, and I know, as you indicated,

Mr Deputy Speaker, that more wanted to speak but were unable to do so. The passion shown today is a demonstration of how important culture and entertainment are not just to our economy and our heritage, but to our wellbeing as a nation. A number of speakers emphasised that by pointing out the economic contribution that the creative industries make, in particular my hon. Friends the Members for Clacton (Giles Watling), for High Peak (Robert Lorgan), for Bury North (James Daly) and for Bolton West (Chris Green), and my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers). They all pointed to the vast contribution—£116 billion—that the creative industries make, supporting 2.1 million jobs. However, they also went on to point out that the contribution is not just economic.

The cultural industries and entertainment sector are critical to the wellbeing of the nation. They bring joy to us. Although many have been unable to operate over the past year, I pay tribute to those who have sought to fill the gap, in particular the broadcasters who have done a fantastic job in keeping us entertained and keeping up the morale of the nation. However, it is not the same as being able to enjoy at first hand the cultural interactions that bring so much value to our lives. I think we all yearn to be able to walk through a museum again, to sit and watch a play or, in my case particularly, to go to the cinema and to enjoy live music. As the hon. Members for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) and for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) said, live music brings an enjoyment that all of us feel is absent from our lives. I have taken particular note of the recommendation from my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore) to look up Deco and their mash-ups as soon as I am able to do so again.

A number of Members have spoken with great power about the cultural institutions in their own constituencies. We are, of course, familiar with west end theatre, which is famous throughout the world, but there are other theatres in London, including the Theatre Royal at Stratford, mentioned by the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge), and the New Wimbledon Theatre, mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond). However, as my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) said, it is not just about London. We should recognise that the cultural institutions of our country are strong right across all our nations. One of my regrets is that I was appointed to this job just three weeks before lockdown started, and I wish for the day when I can go out and visit some of the places that have been mentioned, including the opera house in Buxton, the railways of Darlington, the zoo in Dudley, the castle in Dover and even *Funny Girls* in Blackpool.

The best support that we can give to all these cultural institutions is an assurance that the time when they can reopen is coming. That is why the road map is so critical, as my hon. Friends the Members for Gravesend (Adam Holloway) and for Bracknell (James Sunderland) pointed out. We now have a clear plan, which is irreversible. We have a certainty that we can give as to when these institutions can start to operate again. Of course I understand that people would rather this happened sooner, but I can say to my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell that grass-roots sport, including golf, will be able to resume from 29 March. The reason that we have been able to offer that assurance has been the success of the vaccination programme, as my hon. Friends the

Members for Blackpool South (Scott Benton) and for Dudley North (Marco Longhi) pointed out, and I pay tribute to all those who have worked so hard to roll it out and continue to do so—including, indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North, who told us that he was a volunteer in his local vaccination centre.

The worst thing that could happen to our cultural institutions would be to give them a date on which they could reopen and then have to reverse it again. We all know the huge disappointment and, indeed, cost to many who had planned to reopen. An example was Bill Kenwright's "Love Letters", which was due to reopen at the beginning of December but, just a few days later, London was put back into tier 3 status and it was unable to go ahead. So we need to be relatively confident about those dates.

Several hon. Members mentioned the work that the Department is doing, particularly to explore how large events can return, preferably without social distancing and restrictive capacity caps. I want to assure my hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Jane Hunt), my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet and my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon that we have established the events research programme to look at how those large events can resume. In doing so, we are looking at the pilots that were conducted last year to consider the effectiveness of various measures to reduce the transmission risk in larger venues, including testing. Officials from my Department and from the Department of Health and Social Care are working closely to combine the existing workstreams into one overall research programme, and that programme will start with events such as Project Encore, which will hopefully set out the road map for when those larger events, which are perhaps the most challenging, can start again.

A number of my hon. Friends have recognised the huge commitment that the Government have made to the cultural sector through the £1.57 billion cultural recovery fund. I would like to thank my hon. Friends the Members for Heywood and Middleton (Chris Clarkson), for Gloucester (Richard Graham) and for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker) for recognising the strength of that commitment, and, indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter), who pointed out that, on top of the £1.57 billion, we have the £500 million film and TV production restart scheme. And of course the Government recognise the need to continue that support until these institutions can reopen once again. I cannot give details of what my right hon. Friend the Chancellor the Exchequer will announce tomorrow, although there have already been some indications that he will be giving further support to the cultural sector. As I have said, the sector has benefited and should continue to do so, and I can tell my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Dr Mullan) that that includes nightclubs and music venues, which have been eligible for support.

As many Members have recognised, our cultural and entertainment sectors are world-leading. They are a major contributor not just to the economic growth of this country but to our standing around the world. I echo the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt): I am confident that when we resume, those sectors will come back even stronger.

7 pm

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

## Covid-19: Statutory Sick Pay

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

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** May I ask Members to exit via the door into Members' Lobby? That will allow the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work to take his place for the Adjournment debate. May I ask the Serjeant at Arms to sanitise the Government Dispatch Box during the video link contribution by Richard Burgon?

7 pm

**Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab) [V]:** The idea behind statutory sick pay is as simple as it is important: workers who are ill are financially supported so that they can stay off work to recover. But during a rapidly spreading virus pandemic, it also helps to prevent the spread of infectious illnesses. The test of whether a system of sick pay is working is whether it achieves those simple aims.

Unfortunately, as has been shown time and again during this crisis, the UK's statutory sick pay system is quite simply broken. In the middle of a global pandemic, it is failing to protect either workers who are ill or their wider community. This failure, like so many others of this Government—from Serco test and trace to the personal protective equipment debacle—has contributed to the virus having spiralled out of control and so many losing their lives unnecessarily.

From the very start of this crisis, I have been contacted by constituents who simply cannot get by on statutory sick pay. Before this debate, I invited my constituents to share their experiences of having to rely on statutory sick pay. The stories that people from my constituency sent to me were quite simply heartbreaking: workers forced to use up their annual leave to self-isolate because the sick pay they would get is not enough to keep them going; families who found that sick pay did not cover even a quarter of their bills; and people forced to use a food bank to feed their family and go into debt to pay their bills after just three weeks of relying on statutory sick pay.

I have described just a glimpse of the horrific social harm inflicted on people in this country by this Government's refusal to provide proper financial support during this crisis. People are being forced to choose between putting food on the table and self-isolating to protect their community and their colleagues. This is happening in every constituency of every Member across the country. MPs in this House know it is, and those who refuse to call for better sick pay have to take responsibility for the consequences.

The two biggest problems with sick pay have been clear from the very start: the level that it is paid at is far too low and, even then, huge numbers of workers are excluded from actually getting it. At £95.85 a week, statutory sick pay is an 80% cut in income for an average worker. Many workers simply cannot afford the immediate loss of income. And who can live off £14 per day? The TUC found that two fifths of workers would have to go into debt or miss paying bills if they had to take statutory sick pay.

Of course, the terrible consequences of this unacceptably low level of support are not felt equally. Many of the workers hardest hit by it are the same workers on the

frontline fighting this pandemic. Let us look at social care. The GMB trade union has revealed that the majority of the UK's social care workers are entitled only to statutory minimum sick pay, with no additional sick pay from their employer. When the GMB consulted its members who work in social care about what they would do if they had to rely on statutory sick pay, a full 81% said that they would be forced in to work. The Office for National Statistics found that care homes where staff got contractual sick pay above the level of statutory sick pay were less likely to have covid cases than those where staff were forced to rely on the statutory minimum. It is hard to imagine a more fatally self-defeating system during a pandemic than one that leaves care workers forced to go in to work when they should be self-isolating. How many people died in care homes because of this Government's refusal to properly support workers financially when they are unwell?

As if the paltry level of sick pay was not enough of a problem, nearly 2 million of the lowest paid workers do not even qualify for sick pay because they do not earn enough. The lower earnings limit means that those earning less than £120 a week are prohibited from accessing sick pay—a discriminatory measure, given that 70% of the workers excluded by that limit are women. Millions of self-employed workers are also excluded. That is the stark reality of working conditions in this country in the 21st century: millions of workers—disproportionately women, black and minority ethnic workers, and those on zero-hours contracts—excluded from even the most basic and limited support by the Government.

From the start of the pandemic, Labour has called for urgent action to remove the barriers to sick pay that have left the lowest paid workers without support. Throughout the pandemic, trade unions such as Unite the union have made consistent demands on the Government to increase statutory sick pay to the level of the real living wage, and to remove the minimum income requirement so that every worker who needs to self-isolate is supported to do so. The Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union has also called for the Government to legislate for full rights to contractual sick pay for all workers from day one, paid at 100% of wages. Outside the Conservative party, there is even widespread support in Parliament, with MPs from seven parties signing up to support my motion calling for sick pay at a real living wage level.

I am sure that the Minister's response will include reference to the Government's £500 self-isolation support scheme. It is true that, six months into the pandemic, the Government introduced a scheme to give a one-off payment to some people on low incomes who have to self-isolate. Unfortunately, the scheme is woefully inadequate. Only one in eight workers qualify automatically for the main payment; the rest have had to apply for a discretionary payment, and figures suggest that 70% of applications for support from that scheme were rejected.

Back in November, I asked the Government how many people had applied for that payment. It took more than 100 days to get an answer, and when it finally came, it was that the Government still did not have the figures. No one could honestly look at the scheme and claim that it is an adequate alternative to providing proper sick pay at real living wage levels.

We know that covid is increasingly a disease of the poor. Those living in the most deprived neighbourhoods have been more than twice as likely to die from covid as those in the least deprived. People in some of the lowest-paid manual jobs are three times more likely to die of covid-19 than those in higher-paid, white-collar jobs. Covid is still circulating at higher levels in the poorest neighbourhoods than in the wealthiest. Proper levels of statutory sick pay would disproportionately help those in poorer areas and in manual occupations, and that is what needs to happen. When we look at why the Government have never acted on increasing sick pay as a priority, perhaps that is the real answer.

Sick pay was already broken before the pandemic struck, yet even in a global health crisis, the Government have chosen not to fix it, helping the virus spread out of control. The Government cannot claim not to have been warned in advance of the scale of this problem, because just months before the covid crisis struck, their own consultation on sick pay said that the system of statutory sick pay

“does not reflect modern working practices, such as flexible working,”

and looked at

“widening eligibility for SSP to extend protection to those on the lowest incomes”.

I, along with many in the labour and trade union movements, have been demanding better sick pay for workers for almost a year. In fact, it was a year ago tomorrow—when the UK had a total of just three deaths from covid—that the TUC published a report warning the Government to urgently make our sick pay system fit for purpose. The report called on the Government immediately to raise sick pay to the level of the real living wage and make it accessible to all workers, including the lowest paid. Those recommendations were ignored. It was also last March that the Health Secretary himself said that he could not afford to live off statutory sick pay, but, 12 months on, his Government have done nothing to raise it. If only the Health Secretary were as generous with the payments to working people as he appears to be with his friends when handing out Government contracts.

The Government’s refusal to act decisively has meant that the virus has spread more than it would have done, and people have lost their lives who otherwise would be with us still. The Government knew about this problem from day one but chose not to address it. The decision not to raise sick pay to a level that workers can actually live on is a deliberate political calculation from this Government. They feared that if sick pay was improved during this crisis, they would never be able to lower it again in the future; it would be a permanent gain for working people. This Conservative Government cannot allow that because it would go against the grain of the constant undermining of our welfare state. Fundamentally, the Conservative party sees the social security system as a means to punish—be that by setting universal credit deliberately low or the cruel bedroom tax—rather than it being there to support people when they need help.

The Chancellor has a chance finally to sort this issue out tomorrow at the Budget. If he does not, once again he will have shown which side this Government are on, and it is not on the side of working people and their families.

7.11 pm

**The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Justin Tomlinson):** I thank the hon. Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) for securing this debate.

We have been facing the most serious public health emergency in a generation since the beginning of the pandemic, and the whole of the UK has joined together in a great national effort to face this challenge. Throughout the pandemic, the Government have done, and will continue to do, whatever it takes to fight the virus and get our nation through these difficult times. This Government have a strong safety net in place, and we took action to strengthen it for those who need it most. As part of that action, we introduced the coronavirus job retention scheme and the self-employment income support scheme, increased the universal credit standard allowance by up to £1,040 this financial year, and extended statutory sick pay to those who are self-isolating or shielding in line with the latest Government health guidance. We also went further and made SSP payable from day one instead day four for anybody who is sick, self-isolating or shielding due to coronavirus.

Taken together, these measures help to ensure that employees do not attend work when they should be staying at home, helping to keep themselves and others safe. Where clinically extremely vulnerable individuals are not able to work from home and shielding advice is in place, they should not attend work. Statutory sick pay is available to those who are unable to work, and is intended to be a safety net in cases where their employer chooses not to furlough them under the coronavirus job retention scheme and does not have other suitable policies in place.

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** In my constituency, quite a number of employers did not buy into the furlough scheme, and sick pay simply does not cover costs. I understand that the Minister is always very responsive to the issues; he always has been in any debates that I have been in, and I hope that he will be to this one. Will he and the Government consider grants or a help scheme for those who have got into debt just to feed and heat themselves at this particularly difficult time?

**Justin Tomlinson:** I thank the hon. Member, who I know from several debates to which he has contributed cares passionately about those in most need in his constituency. I am meeting the First Minister of the Northern Ireland Assembly next week to discuss a number of issues, including this, and I will set out in my speech the wider support that I know he will be looking to champion, and rightly so.

Clinically extremely vulnerable individuals are currently being advised to shield until 31 March. We expect employers to do the right thing and help their employees in following public health guidance. That is underpinned by the clear guidance issued by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, ACAS and the Health and Safety Executive to help employers make workplaces covid-secure. Where individuals have concerns about their health and safety at work, they should raise them directly with their employers or with staff representatives, HSE or their local authority.

The Government have also provided a comprehensive economic response that is one of the most generous globally, taking unprecedented steps to protect people’s income and support businesses, most notably through

[Justin Tomlinson]

the coronavirus job retention scheme. We know that this has been a difficult time for businesses too, with many experiencing increased levels of absence due to employees needing to self-isolate. Any increase in the rate of SSP during the pandemic would have placed an immediate, direct financial burden on employers at a time when we know that many of them are struggling. That could have put more jobs at risk.

Many of those earning below the lower earnings limit who are not eligible for SSP are already in receipt of benefits, meaning that the welfare safety net is the most efficient way of providing targeted further financial support. Statutory sick pay should not be looked at in isolation. It is the minimum level of income replacement that employers must provide to eligible employees, and the majority of employees receive above the statutory minimum. Those who require further financial support while unable to work have been and will continue to be supported by the Government. For example, where someone's income is reduced while on SSP, they may be able to claim universal credit. Where they are not eligible for SSP, they may be able to claim UC and new-style employment and support allowance. For ESA, we have removed the seven waiting days for claimants affected by coronavirus, so it is payable from day one of the claim.

For the millions of hard-working people who are self-employed, we continue to provide generous support through the self-employment income support scheme. The minimum income floor in universal credit has been relaxed for the duration of the crisis, which means that where self-employed claimants' earnings have fallen significantly, their UC award will have increased to reflect their lower earnings.

Beyond the welfare safety net, we have also introduced a number of unprecedented packages of support to put money directly into the pockets of those who are in most need. We are providing financial support to self-isolate to those on low incomes through the £500 test and trace support scheme, alongside £35 million being made available to local authorities for discretionary payments to support those on low incomes who cannot work from home if they are required to self-isolate because they have tested positive for coronavirus or have been identified as a contact of someone who has.

We have worked closely with local authorities to monitor the effectiveness of the scheme since it launched in September 2020 and have listened to feedback from charities and support groups on the frontline. I welcome the changes to the eligibility criteria to include a parent or guardian who is staying off work to look after a child who is self-isolating. We will also be making an additional £20 million available for discretionary payments every month from March until the end of the scheme, which has been extended until the summer. Employers can also furlough employees who are on long-term sickness absence or have been advised to shield.

At tomorrow's Budget, the Chancellor will set out the next phase of our economic support package, reflecting the Prime Minister's road map to ease restrictions published last month and tailoring support for individuals and businesses to reflect the changing public health restrictions. The actions that this Government have taken were the right ones to respond to the immediate short-term pressures that the pandemic presented, but it is right that we also think about the longer term.

As the Minister for Disabled People, I welcome the opportunity to highlight the "Health is everyone's business" consultation, in which we sought views on the rate of statutory sick pay and the role that employers can and should play in supporting employees who are disabled or have long-term health conditions to stay in and thrive in work. We have explored how long-term reform of SSP could support the Government's ambition to reduce ill health-related job loss and drive transformational change, so that those managing long-term health conditions can live and work well. I cannot stress enough the importance of that work. One in five people in this country have a disability or health condition, and the vast majority of them will get that while they are of working age. It is therefore absolutely right that we review and look at the ways we support both employees with changing health conditions and employers to do the right thing.

**Jim Shannon:** I thank the Minister for giving way again. One thing that is very much an issue in my constituency—it probably is in the constituency of the hon. Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) as well—is mental health. When it comes to accessing all those benefits, there is absolutely no doubt that mental health and anxiety issues are one of the greatest crises we have had for a long time. Can the Minister and his Department offer help to those people with anxiety or depression or wellbeing issues?

**Justin Tomlinson:** The hon. Member, with laser-like precision, has identified one of the key issues. For those employees who have a fluctuating health condition—for example, mental health—one of the inbuilt challenges of the system is that someone is presumed to be either 100% fit for work or 100% sick, which stops them dipping in and out or having phased returns to work. Also, while society's awareness of issues around mental health and mental wellbeing is significantly improving, there is not an easy guidebook that any employer—particularly small and medium-sized employers—can simply take off the shelf and then know exactly what to do. Therefore, we must look to address the issue of 100% fit or 100% sick to allow for that phased return as well as significantly improve the guidance and support for employers to ensure that people do not drop out of work. We recognise that work is good for people's health, and it is significantly harder to help somebody back into work, dealing not only with their health condition but with the loss of confidence from losing their job, than it is to provide that support earlier on.

SSP maintains an important link between the employee and their employer during sickness absence while providing a level of income replacement for such a period. That is why the consultation set out that we are minded to extend SSP to those earning below the lower earnings limit, who are not currently eligible for financial support from their employer during a period of sickness absence. I think this is an area where the Government and the hon. Member for Leeds East would agree: it is important that there is a link, regardless of the number of hours that an employee works with their employer, because it is a partnership to deal with short-term, medium-term or long-term health conditions for the benefit ultimately of the employee but also the employer. We know that good work is good for one's health and that work can play an important role in a recovery.

The consultation also proposed changes to SSP rules to allow for fully flexible phased returns to work, as I have set out, with SSP being paid alongside an employee's wage. That can be beneficial for both the employer and the employee. We know that many employers are already taking positive action to support their employees to remain in work, but many businesses—particularly small and medium-sized organisations—need access to improved information and advice on how to better manage health in the workplace. We want to ensure that employers are supported and equipped so that they can do the right thing by their employees, and many of them wish to do so. We will publish the findings shortly.

Crucially, as we begin to build back better, employers will have a vital role to play in creating workplaces in which all employees can thrive. It is by working together that we can truly transform the lives of disabled people and those with health conditions. The benefit of that will be felt by all, so we must each play our part. I welcome the points made by the hon. Member for Leeds East. This is something that we will all continue to focus on.

*Question put and agreed to.*

7.24 pm

*House adjourned.*



# Written Statements

*Tuesday 2 March 2021*

## **BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY**

### **National Security and Investment: Mandatory Notification Regime Consultation Response**

**The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kwasi Kwarteng):** Today, the Government published their response to the consultation on secondary legislation to define the sectors subject to mandatory notification under the National Security and Investment Bill.

This Government are a champion for free trade, recognising that inward investment is economically highly beneficial. Investment in UK plc boosts productivity by backing businesses to create good jobs and develop skills and will help support our economic recovery from covid-19. The UK is open for investment, but not for exploitation.

An open approach to international investment must also include appropriate safeguards to protect our national security and the safety of our citizens. The UK and our allies face continued and broad-ranging hostile activity from foreign intelligence agencies and others, who seek to compromise our national security. When it comes to investment, we are seeing novel means to undermine the UK's national security that go beyond traditional mergers and acquisitions and also go beyond the reach of our current powers, such as structuring deals to obscure who is behind them. Such behaviour, left unchecked, can leave sensitive UK businesses vulnerable to disruption and espionage. It is crucial that the Government are able to fully combat these threats.

The National Security and Investment Bill creates a new screening mechanism enabling the Government to intervene in acquisitions resulting in control over entities and assets that may pose a risk to national security.

Proposed acquirers of certain shares or voting rights in specified qualifying entities in the most sensitive sectors of the economy will be required to notify the Secretary of State and receive clearance before completing their acquisition. This is to ensure that the Government are informed of potentially sensitive acquisitions before they take place and are thus able to take action ahead of time to address any risk to national security that would arise on completion. This "mandatory regime" is supported by a voluntary notification option for relevant acquisitions across the rest of the economy and a power for the Secretary of State to scrutinise qualifying acquisitions that have not been notified.

The overwhelming majority of transactions will, though, be unaffected by these new powers. We estimate that less than 1% of all mergers and acquisitions and asset transactions will result in a notification to Government.

The consultation invited views on the sectors in scope of mandatory notification, sought responses on whether the definitions provided sufficiently clear parameters to inform businesses and investors of the need to notify, and whether the definitions were proportionate. The consultation

set out the draft definitions of 17 sectors in which national security risks are more likely to rise than in the wider economy.

These sectors are:

- Advanced materials
- Advanced robotics
- Artificial intelligence
- Civil nuclear
- Communications
- Computing hardware
- Critical suppliers to Government
- Critical suppliers to the Emergency Services
- Cryptographic authentication
- Data infrastructure
- Defence
- Energy
- Military and dual-use
- Quantum technologies
- Satellite and space technologies
- Synthetic biology
- Transport

Responses to this consultation suggested that many of the sector definitions were broad in scope and would require further specificity to enable acquirers to identify whether they would be in scope of mandatory notification. After careful consideration of all the responses, the Government intend to refine the definitions and have produced the next iteration of the definitions in today's publication.

The Government intend to carry out further, targeted engagement with certain sectors to finalise these definitions. The final definitions will be set out in regulations following Royal Assent to the Bill.

This approach will ensure that the regime is targeted and proportionate and keeps Britain firmly open for business. It will bring us into line with other countries, such as the USA, whose Committee on Foreign Investment also operates a mandatory notification model that investors will be familiar with, and build on the best practice established around the world by like-minded countries.

In summary, it will deliver a balanced regime that provides the Government with the flexible powers they need while keeping our country firmly open to investment.

I will place a copy of the consultation response in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS815]

## **INTERNATIONAL TRADE**

### **Trade and Agriculture Commission Report**

**The Secretary of State for International Trade (Elizabeth Truss):** Last year, the Government established the independent Trade and Agriculture Commission (TAC) to place UK farming at the heart of our trade policy.

Today the Commission publishes its advisory report on trade and agriculture. The report makes recommendations covering:

- The strong action needed to maximise export promotion opportunities for the agrifood sector.

- The UK leadership required at the WTO to change international framework rules on trade and standards, to tackle global issues like climate change and environmental degradation.

The UK promoting free and fair trade while maintaining high standards in areas such as animal welfare, ethical standards, and the environment.

The UK being particularly supportive of developing countries to access the full benefits of the global trading system.

Welcoming the statutory Trade and Agriculture Commission to help uphold effective scrutiny of trade deals.

In compiling this advisory report, the commission sought evidence from trade and agriculture experts from across our four nations, including from local farmers, businesses, the National Farmers' Unions and parliamentarians.

I am grateful to all those who contributed evidence and expertise during this challenging time. I thank the chair, Tim Smith, and all commission members for delivering this incisive advisory report and I look forward to carefully considering the recommendations and will respond in due course.

To continue the excellent work that the Commission has started, we are now putting the Commission on a statutory footing and evolving its role to boost scrutiny of new free trade deals. We will seek to appoint new members in due course.

In addition, last week I launched our Open Doors campaign to help farmers and producers take advantage of the 64 trade deals we have done to date, to sell more around the world including in fast-growing markets in the Americas and Asia Pacific.

A copy of the advisory report has been placed in the Libraries of both Houses and has been published on [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk).

[HCWS814]

## WORK AND PENSIONS

### Pension Schemes Act

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman):** The Pension Schemes Act 2021 received Royal Assent on 11 February. We are now setting out next steps, delivering on the commitment made during the passage of the Pension Schemes Bill and following extensive engagement since report stage in the House of Commons. The Act will introduce:

Three new criminal offences, including a sentence of up to seven years in jail for bosses who plunder or run pension schemes into the ground.

The legislative framework needed to usher in pensions dashboards that will give savers greater control over, and awareness of, their pensions.

The legislative framework to allow collective money purchase pension schemes to operate.

Powers to require pension schemes to take the Paris agreement temperature goal into account, and other climate change goals set by the Government.

Strengthened rules around pension transfers to prevent members being misled in relation to transferring their pensions pots.

Measures to support trustees and employers to improve the way they plan and manage scheme funding over the longer term and enable the Pensions Regulator to take action more effectively to protect members' pensions.

We are now progressing the secondary legislation to ensure the UK's pension system is safer, better and greener. The sequencing of the subsequent legislation will allow for proper consultation, engagement with key stakeholders and further parliamentary debate, through affirmative procedure where required.

Following our consultation in January 2021 on climate change, we will lay these world-leading regulations this summer to come into force ahead of COP26. This will make the UK the first major economy in the world to legislate for, and bring into practice, the recommendations of the Taskforce on Climate-related Financial Disclosures, ensuring climate change is at the heart of the pensions system.

On the Pensions Regulator's powers, we will consult on the majority of draft regulations this spring, and will commence these powers and the criminal offences measures in the autumn. For the duty to give notices and statements to the regulator in respect of certain events, we will consult on the draft regulations later this year, for commencement as soon as practical thereafter.

In early summer we plan to consult on draft regulations for scams and collective defined contribution schemes, with commencement on the scams measures from early autumn 2021.

We aim to consult on proposed regulations for the pensions dashboard later this year and lay draft regulations before Parliament for debate in 2022. Delivery remains on track for 2023 in line with the plans published by the pensions dashboards programme.

On defined benefit scheme funding, later this year we will consult on draft regulations, following promised engagement with key interested parties, working closely with colleagues at the Pensions Regulator as they develop the revised funding code, which will also be subject to a full public consultation.

Both Ministers and regulators will continue to engage with both Houses of Parliament as these measures progress.

[HCWS816]

# Ministerial Correction

*Tuesday 2 March 2021*

## EDUCATION

### Support for University Students: Covid-19

*The following is an extract from the urgent question on 3 February 2021 on Support for University Students: Covid-19.*

**Esther McVey:** The Government set the maximum amount that universities can charge for tuition fees during normal times. Is it not therefore the responsibility of Government to set the maximum amount that universities can charge during this covid-19 period, when students are not getting the education or the experience they have paid for because of Government restrictions?

**Michelle Donelan:** We will continue to monitor the situation. However, it is important to note that reducing tuition fees would not put money into students' pockets here and now, and 50% of students do not pay back their loaned amount. What is important is ensuring that students get the quantity, the quality and the accessibility of tuition in these really difficult and challenging times. [*Official Report, 3 February 2021, Vol. 688, c. 962.*]

*Letter of correction from the Minister for Universities:*

An error has been identified in the response I gave to my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Esther McVey).

The correct response should have been:

**Michelle Donelan:** We will continue to monitor the situation. However, it is important to note that reducing tuition fees would not put money into students' pockets here and now, and **75% of current students are not expected to fully** pay back their loaned amount. What is important is ensuring that students get the quantity, the quality and the accessibility of tuition in these really difficult and challenging times.



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# MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

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**not later than  
Tuesday 9 March 2021**

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**Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]**

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