

**Thursday
27 May 2021**

**Volume 696
No. 11**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 27 May 2021

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

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

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

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

ELECTORAL COMMISSION (ANSWER TO ADDRESS)

The Vice-Chamberlain of the Household reported a message from the Queen in reply to a loyal and dutiful Address from this House:

I have received your humble Address praying that I should appoint John Pullinger CB as the Chair of the Electoral Commission with effect from 1 May for the period ending on 31 April 2025. I will comply with your request.

NEW WRIT

Ordered,

That the Speaker do issue his Warrant to the Clerk of the Crown to make out a new Writ for the electing of a Member to serve in this present Parliament for the Borough constituency of Batley and Spen in the room of Tracy Lynn Brabin, who, since her election for the said Borough constituency, has been appointed to the Office of Steward and Bailiff of Her Majesty's Three Chiltern Hundreds of Stoke, Desborough and Burnham in the county of Buckingham.—(*Sir Alan Campbell.*)

Oral Answers to Questions

CABINET OFFICE

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office was asked—

Barriers to Trade Between EU and UK

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): What recent assessment his Department has made of the extent of barriers to trade between the EU and the UK for (a) importers and (b) exporters since the end of the transition period. [900565]

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): What recent assessment his Department has made of the extent of barriers to trade between the EU and the UK for (a) importers and (b) exporters since the end of the transition period. [900571]

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): What steps he is taking to support businesses that are subject to non-tariff barriers to trade with the EU. [900600]

The Paymaster General (Penny Mordaunt): We have been working closely with businesses to help them adjust to any new requirements for trading with the EU. Monthly

Office for National Statistics trade figures have shown that exports to the EU have rebounded strongly and have been above average monthly 2020 levels.

Dr Whitford [V]: On top of the impact on our local fishing fleet, Brexit is driving businesses to move operations to Europe. Foxglide, a sportswear company, is not just facing shipping delays and having to pay VAT on the materials it imports, but, due to rules of origin, facing tariffs on the garments it exports to the EU. So does the Minister accept that, contrary to the Prime Minister's claims, the deal does not deliver tariff-free trade and is damaging local economies?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that particular case. As she will know, we are always happy to talk directly to businesses, or through their Members of Parliament, to see what we can do to help their particular circumstances, but all the issues that she raises are being worked through by my noble Friend Lord Frost. We are also setting up new structures to work with our counterparts in the EU. We have opportunities with member states to resolve these matters.

Anne McLaughlin [V]: UK trade exports to the EU fell 23% in the first quarter of the year, compared with 0.8% to non-EU countries. It is clear to everyone that that is a consequence of the Tories' Brexit deal—everyone that is except this Government. Will the Minister finally accept that her Government's deal has harmed exports—in other words, harmed business in my constituency, in her constituency and right across these islands?

Penny Mordaunt: I do not accept that. Businesses have had to contend with a huge amount and they have done a tremendous job to get this far. There are remaining issues, but, on the trade figures, as I said in my opening remarks, they have rebounded; they are actually above average compared with what they were at the beginning of last year. What the hon. Lady does not refer to is the 63 trade deals that we have done elsewhere in the world and that will bring huge opportunities for businesses in her constituency and across the UK.

Jonathan Edwards: Five months ago, I raised with the Cabinet Secretary the case of a local business facing significant problems importing from Belgium. It is now reporting a doubling in time before products arrive, significant extra costs and significant extra red tape. These are not just teething problems. Is it not clear that the task requires wholesale dental treatment, starting with a far closer alignment with the single market, starting with an urgent veterinary agreement on sanitary and phytosanitary rules?

Penny Mordaunt: I would be very happy to look at any cases that hon. Members raise. We can put them in touch with the subject matter experts to work through what mitigations we can bring and what financial support we can give to make sure that businesses are accessing the schemes. As I say, my noble Friend Lord Frost is very focused on these issues. We have done a huge amount of work with businesses directly but also through their trade bodies, and we will bring forward new support for them as we go further to give them the bespoke advice that they need.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): In February, I raised with the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster the issue of Wilde Mode, a company in my constituency, and the increases in shipping costs it has had. In the past week or so, it has confirmed that it is still being quoted about €1,000 to ship in from Poland, when pre Brexit it was effectively zero. What concrete action are the Government going to take to resolve these problems, to end this uncompetitiveness and to mitigate these massive Brexit-driven cost increases?

Penny Mordaunt: In addition to the work that my noble Friend Lord Frost is leading on, which the right hon. Gentleman will be aware of, and the financial support we have put in place, we are monitoring what businesses are being charged, whether it is through trader support services or through particular aspects of the supply chain. We are monitoring those costs, and that is factored into our work and the work that Lord Frost is taking forward.

Stewart Hosie: Monitoring is fine, but we need action. Let me raise the issue of another business: ATL Turbine Services, which brings into Scotland for repair turbine parts from around Europe and the world. It has told me that its post-Brexit admin costs are now 10 to 15 times greater than they were last year. It cannot use the Revenue's post-VAT accounting processes. It is encountering significantly more shipping errors, not just costs. Most damningly, it has said that, while the high-level structure has been put in place, the details of how it works in practice are basically non-existent and, where they do exist, have fallen short. Cost increases, administrative burdens, shipping errors, no useful guidance—when will this Government finally take these issues seriously? Would it not be better to admit, finally, that the truth is that, for business, Brexit is not working?

Penny Mordaunt: I have been doing a large amount of work with Lord Frost to look at what advice and support there is for businesses and what their needs are. They now need at this stage more bespoke support, and we are standing that up and putting it in place. We will be informing Members of this House about that in short order. As well as mitigating the difficulties that we are having, as a nation, to work through, we want people to maximise the opportunities. The trade deals that I referred to represent £217 billion-worth of business. We want all businesses across the UK to maximise that and we will provide the space for them to do that.

UK-EU Trade and Co-operation Agreement

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): What plans his Department has for transitioning to permanent trading arrangements under the UK-EU trade and co-operation agreement. [900566]

The Paymaster General (Penny Mordaunt): Following the ratification of the trade and co-operation agreement, we are working with the EU to set up the Partnership Council and the specialised committees that form part of the treaty infrastructure to ensure that new trading arrangements are implemented and are working effectively.

Patrick Grady: From the testimony we heard at the Joint Committee session yesterday and the answers we have had today, we know that the Government are in

complete chaos on all of this. They went into Brexit with their eyes wide shut. Is it not the case that, once we are clear of the covid pandemic, the chaos and true costs of Brexit will become clear?

Penny Mordaunt: I would gently say to the hon. Gentleman that Lord Frost and his team are working through these issues. Only next month, we will hopefully be having the first Partnership Council meeting. Those structures will be stood up, so we will have other methods where we can work through these issues. When Lord Frost goes into bat on those issues, it would be helpful if Members of this House stood up for all nations of the United Kingdom in the negotiations and got behind him. I think that would improve our chances.

Covid-19: Public Inquiry

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): What progress the Government have made on the public inquiry into the covid-19 outbreak. [900568]

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What progress the Government have made on the public inquiry into the covid-19 outbreak. [900575]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): On 12 May, the Prime Minister confirmed to the House that a public inquiry into covid-19 would be established on a statutory basis with full formal powers. It will begin its work in spring 2022, and further details will be set out in due course.

Afzal Khan [V]: Earlier this week, I visited the covid memorial wall opposite Parliament to remember those I have lost to this crisis, including my mum and both my parents-in-law. Yesterday, grieving families like mine watched in horror as Mr Cummings detailed the litany of failures and gross incompetence right at the heart of this Government, which the proposed statutory inquiry will no doubt examine in much more detail. Given the importance of this inquiry to bereaved families, will the Minister agree to meet me and representatives from Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice as soon as possible, to ensure that their voices are heard?

Michael Gove: First, may I pass on my condolences to the hon. Member for the sad loss of members of his family? I know that the whole House will want to pass on sympathies and condolences. So many people have lost those dear to them. That is why it is so important that, at the inquiry, we ensure that the voices of victims are heard and their questions are answered properly and fully.

Rachael Maskell [V]: The healing will not start until the public inquiry begins. Yesterday's Select Committees' damning evidence clearly caused significant pain to grieving families. They need answers now—they need to know whether decisions by this Government could have avoided the death of their loved ones, and that includes 396 families in my city of York. Does the Minister understand why the commencement of the public inquiry must not be delayed until next year, especially following yesterday's evidence? Will he bring it forward and ensure that bereaved families not only are consulted on the scope of the inquiry but have their questions answered?

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady makes an important point. A statutory inquiry is obviously the right way to ensure that all the right questions are asked and that full answers are arrived at. To ensure that the inquiry works, the experience, voices and views of those who have suffered so much must be a critical part in ensuring that it is set up appropriately.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Jane Roche from Erdington tragically lost her father Vince and her sister Jocelyn within five days of one another last April. This devastating loss has driven Jane and thousands like her to be tireless campaigners for justice for those who lost their lives. Does the Minister agree that it is imperative that the public inquiry has the full confidence of the relatives who are grieving to this day? Will he therefore commit to ensuring that the bereaved families groups are fully consulted on who is the chair of the inquiry and the inquiry's terms of reference? Finally, will he commit to the Prime Minister meeting personally the covid-19 bereaved families? They want to meet with him. Will he meet with them?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising the case of his constituents who have suffered so much and who, understandably, want to ensure that the inquiry provides them with answers at a time of grief and not only contributes to the healing process but ensures that appropriate lessons are learned. I look forward, as everyone in the Government does, to working with victims' groups to ensure that the inquiry can command their confidence.

Civil Service Jobs Outside London

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to deliver civil service jobs outside London. [900569]

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): What assessment he has made of the east midlands and Leicestershire as a potential location to help deliver the Places for Growth programme. [900579]

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to deliver civil service jobs outside London. [900582]

Suzanne Webb (Stourbridge) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to deliver civil service jobs outside London. [900588]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): The Government are committed to the relocation of 22,000 roles from London to every part of the United Kingdom by the end of this decade. It is all part of our Places for Growth initiative, and it will ensure that the civil service is more representative of the communities it serves, bringing more diversity of thought into policy making. The Cabinet Office has recently announced that our second headquarters will be located in Glasgow, and a number of other Departments have announced their plans to increase their presence across the UK. Just last week, the Home Office announced that there will be 500 new jobs in Stoke-on-Trent, and the Department

for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy announced that 865 roles are relocating to six locations across the UK, including Darlington.

Alexander Stafford: My right hon. Friend will be aware that I have been fighting for the decentralisation of the civil service to the north, particularly to my constituency of Rother Valley, and the Leader of the House responded to me positively on this only last week. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that the civil service jobs relocating to northern areas will be high-quality, high-powered roles, rather than simply backroom processing positions, which I fear would be a purely cosmetic change and would not constitute a real shift in power to the north? Can I invite him to come to Rother Valley to discuss those opportunities and all new job opportunities in Rother Valley?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a very important point, and it is absolutely critical that the jobs relocated include those in the senior civil service responsible for decision making. Not only do areas such as South Yorkshire and his constituency provide a very high quality of life for individuals, but it is important that the talent there is deployed at the very heart of decision making. I hope to be able to visit Rother Valley to see my hon. Friend and others in his constituency next month. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Members should not walk in front of a Member during the answer to their question.

Alicia Kearns [V]: This Government's levelling-up agenda will transform our nation, but does my right hon. Friend agree that we cannot deliver this agenda unless we level up both cities and rural areas such as Rutland and Melton? Can I invite him and his officials to visit the rural capital of food, Melton Mowbray, to see why nowhere in the country makes a more compelling offer for a Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs office and the transformative Places for Growth programme than Melton, and why this will show the Government's commitment to the east midlands and to rural areas?

Michael Gove: Rutland and Melton could not wish for a more effective advocate than my hon. Friend. She talked to my colleague Lord Agnew and me in the Cabinet Office just last week to press the case for a relocation of jobs to Melton. It has a superb agricultural college, is at the heart of our food-producing countryside, produces superb products and also has many of the facilities, logistical and otherwise, that would recommend it to Government Departments, and I look forward to working with her on the prospect of relocation.

Jonathan Gullis [V]: On behalf of the people of Stoke-on-Trent, Kidsgrove and Talke, I want to thank my right hon. Friend, his colleagues in the Cabinet Office and the Home Secretary—the former Stokie and Keele University graduate—for passing our litmus test on the Government's commitment to levelling up in delivering over 550 high-skilled and well-paid jobs by making Stoke-on-Trent the second home for the Home Office. Does my right hon. Friend agree with me that this major investment from this Conservative Government shows that the people of Stoke-on-Trent will never be forgotten or take for granted again, as they have been previously?

Michael Gove: One of the regular features of the last few months has been the near daily popping into my WhatsApp, email or SMS box of messages from my hon. Friend pressing the case for Stoke-on-Trent and for the relocation of senior civil service jobs, and can I say that his persistence and advocacy have paid off? My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has recognised that Stoke-on-Trent—an amazing place—is absolutely the right home for the second Home Office HQ.

Suzanne Webb: Now here comes my pitch!

My Stourbridge constituency is the jewel of the urban west midlands, full of talent and ambition, and some may say it is the perfect “location, location” for any future proposed civil service moves outside London. Does my right hon. Friend agree with me that of course Stourbridge should be top of the list? Of course, the Cabinet Office would be more than welcome to locate there.

Michael Gove: I am tempted to say that it is rather like the judgment of Paris. In choosing between Stourbridge or Wolverhampton or Walsall, it is almost as though one is choosing between three beautiful divines or deities. All I would say is that Stourbridge is a fantastic location not just for future Government jobs, but for the private sector. It is part of a west midlands undergoing a revival, with new, energetic Members of Parliament like her and of course a re-elected metro Mayor in Andy Street.

Voter ID: Enfranchisement

Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the potential effect of the introduction of voter ID on levels of enfranchisement. [900570]

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the potential effect of the introduction of voter ID on levels of enfranchisement. [900584]

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the potential effect of the introduction of voter ID on levels of enfranchisement. [900604]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will take these Questions together, if that is okay.

Dame Angela Eagle [V]: Some 3.5 million people in the UK do not have the type of ID papers that this Government have deemed suitable to allow them to participate in a vote, so what are the Government going to do to ensure that people will not be denied their basic human right to take part in a democratic, free and fair election in the UK by these Government changes?

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady makes a very important point. It is integral to our democracy that everyone has the chance to vote and to have their voice heard, and research commissioned by the Cabinet Office shows that 98% of the electorate already hold an accepted form of photographic identification, and for those who do not currently a free local voter card will be available from their local authority.

Ellie Reeves [V]: The Bromley wards in my constituency were part of a voter ID pilot in 2018 and the council's own figures suggest that 154 people were turned away from polling stations because of the requirement for ID. If this was scaled up nationally the overall number of those disfranchised would be huge, and the Equality and Human Rights Commission says it would disproportionately impact ethnic minority communities and older people, yet there were only 33 allegations of voter personation at the 2019 general election. Can the Minister not see the huge disparity here?

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady makes an important point. It is incumbent on local authorities like her excellent local authority in Lewisham to work to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to vote. I should say, because her question gives me an opportunity to do so, that in recent local elections, not just for the London Assembly and the London Mayor but across the country, those who work in local government—returning officers and others—did a sterling job in challenging circumstances, and I know that as we introduce reforms to ensure the integrity of the ballot, local authorities such as hers will be at the forefront of delivering those changes.

Zarah Sultana [V]: The Prime Minister once said:

“If I am ever asked...to produce my ID card as evidence that I am who I say I am...then I will...physically eat it”,

so why the change of heart? It is not because of evidence of voter ballot fraud, because just six cases were confirmed at the last election while millions of people risk losing their vote because they do not have photo ID. Might it instead be because the Conservatives want to copy voter suppression tactics used in the USA, disproportionately disenfranchising black, Asian and ethnic minority communities, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, working-class people, trans people and young people—all groups less likely to vote Conservative?

Michael Gove: We are not seeking to emulate America; we are seeking to emulate the Labour Government who introduced a form of photographic identification for voters in Northern Ireland when they were in power. I should say that the hon. Lady made reference to working-class people, and overwhelmingly, working-class people now are much more likely to vote Conservative than Labour.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster knows fine well that there was evidence of voter personation in Northern Ireland, which was why we needed to see a change in legislation there, but he also knows that there have been only four convicted cases of electoral personation in Britain. So with £4 million of taxpayers' money already down the drain on testing this policy, that is £1 million per conviction; I have got to ask him, does he think this is really a good use of taxpayers' money?

Michael Gove: Oh yes, absolutely.

Cat Smith: I have to question whether the right hon. Gentleman thinks that is a good use of taxpayers' money when there are people waiting for mental health beds up and down this country; I have to ask him whether it is the Government's priority when we have children needing to catch up on the education that they have been denied over the past year. If the Government

want to spend this money on electoral matters, why not get the 9 million people who are not registered correctly in this country registered on the electoral rolls, allow them to use their vote and consider introducing universal voter registration?

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady makes two important points. Obviously, as we emerge from covid concentrating on recovery in public services is important, and she is absolutely right to say that there is work to be done not just in mental health but in the NHS and education, but fundamentally the integrity of our democracy is an important issue. As she knows, and as she has been reminded by my hon. Friend the Minister for the Constitution and Devolution, the Labour party's own internal democracy depends on the production of voter ID and—*[Interruption.]* Facts are chieftains that win a ding, as we say in Aberdeen, and on that basis we are delighted to be emulating Labour party policy, in this regard at least.

Government Contracts: Bids from Small Businesses

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to increase opportunities for small businesses to bid for Government contracts. [900572]

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to increase opportunities for small businesses to bid for Government contracts. [900573]

The Minister without Portfolio (Amanda Milling): Small and medium-sized businesses are the backbone of our UK economy. That is why it is vital that we are ensuring that the power of Government spending supports that vital sector, as part of both the economic recovery from covid-19 and our levelling-up agenda. We are increasing opportunities for SMEs in a variety of ways, and our measures are working. Those measures include breaking up contracts into smaller chunks, transparently publishing contract pipelines and removing complexity from the bidding process. Additionally, our new social value model explicitly allows greater weight to be given to those bids that help drive post-covid recovery.

Sally-Ann Hart [V]: Hastings and Rother Federation of Small Businesses has highlighted the need for small business-led levelling up. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to ensure that small businesses in places such as beautiful Hastings and Rye have opportunities in public procurement processes, in line with a rebalancing of local economies?

Amanda Milling: I agree that SMEs play a vital role in our levelling-up agenda. We want to see a greater variety of companies delivering Government contracts from every corner of our country. I am sure that our new social value approach will mean more opportunities for SMEs and social enterprises to win Government contracts by demonstrating the full extent of the value that they will generate, not just economically but taking into account the additional social benefits that can be achieved from the delivery of contracts.

Craig Tracey: In its last report, the women and enterprise all-party parliamentary group found that women-owned businesses added £115 billion to the UK economy,

despite securing only about 5% of Government and public sector contracts. What more can the Government do to encourage more female-owned small businesses to come forward to apply for contracts and have the confidence that they will have an equal chance in the procurement process?

Amanda Milling: I thank my hon. Friend for everything that he does as chair of the APPG on women and enterprise. I share his concern that SME owners of all backgrounds should be benefiting from the investment that Government contracts bring. We are doing more than ever to encourage all SMEs, including those owned by women, into public procurement. Government spending with SMEs continues to rise, with 26.7% of the £58 billion spent by the Government in 2019-20 going to SMEs.

Levelling-up Agenda

Darren Henry (Broxtowe) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to implement their levelling-up agenda. [900576]

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to implement their levelling-up agenda. [900577]

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to implement their levelling-up agenda. [900587]

Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to implement their levelling-up agenda. [900589]

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to implement their levelling-up agenda. [900592]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): Levelling up is at the heart of the Government's agenda to build back better after the pandemic and to deliver for citizens in every part of the United Kingdom. Later this year, the Government will publish a landmark levelling-up White Paper, which will set out bold new policy interventions to improve livelihoods and opportunity in every part of the United Kingdom.

Darren Henry [V]: The levelling-up agenda set out by this Government will ensure that long-forgotten communities across the midlands finally get the investment they deserve. Levelling up in order to regenerate our town centres and high streets, support individuals into employment, improve local transport links and invest in local culture will have a hugely positive impact across our country and in my constituency of Broxtowe. Does my right hon. Friend agree that having the HS2 east midlands hub in Toton is the only choice in line with the Government's agenda to level up the east midlands?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. He is a brilliantly effective advocate for Nottinghamshire and the people he serves. Indeed, investment in HS2 is critical to levelling up. The case he makes for Toton is one that I know resonates in the Department for Transport,

and I will make sure that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is aware of his dedicated advocacy for that particular outcome.

Sir David Evennett [V]: I welcome the Government's action so far on the levelling-up agenda to spread opportunity across the UK in order to support jobs, businesses and economic growth. However, I urge my right hon. Friend to pay special attention to the under-achievement of working-class boys, many of whom are not reaching their full potential. In particular, it is essential to ensure that people who work in the civil service come from all walks of life.

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend, as ever, is spot on. As well as being a brilliantly effective advocate for business, he is also someone with a distinguished former career in education, particularly further and technical education, and in advancing the careers of young people from working-class backgrounds. He is absolutely right. We need to do more in the civil service, as the recent Social Mobility Commission report points out, echoing points that he has been making for some time.

Sara Britcliffe: I very much welcome the levelling-up fund and the transformative difference it can make to constituents such as mine in Hyndburn and Haslingden. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this is only a small part of our levelling-up agenda and that it is important that investment in local transport infrastructure continues, such as looking at the scope for freight terminals and the reopening of railway lines?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and Accrington and Oswaldtwistle could not have a better advocate. She is absolutely correct to point out that we need not just new investment in improved rail—indeed, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport has been reversing some of the Beeching cuts, with more to follow—but to ensure that local bus services and other transport routes are invested in. I know that she is a particularly passionate advocate for improving local bus services as well.

Dr James Davies: It is very welcome that north Wales is set to benefit from the UK Government's levelling-up agenda, but will my right hon. Friend confirm what actions he is taking to ensure that it benefits not only the region as a whole, but areas of particular localised need?

Michael Gove: I am looking forward to visiting north Wales and, I hope, my hon. Friend's constituency, later this summer. One of the things I want to do is make sure that every aspect of levelling up—not just macro infrastructure projects but the micro projects that contribute so much to making communities cherished and attractive—are part of the levelling-up fund. I look forward in particular to working with local government in north Wales to make sure that our funds are spent as effectively as possible.

Steve Double: Cornwall has been recognised for decades as one of the most disadvantaged parts of our country. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that Cornwall will be at the heart of the Government's levelling-up agenda? Can he say what plans the Government have specifically to invest in the Cornish economy and the jobs of the future?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend will know that the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care was in Cornwall earlier this week. He spoke from Cornwall at the Cabinet meeting emphasising the vital importance of investment not just in improved health care in Cornwall, but of making sure that jobs and opportunities for people in Cornwall were extended as well. The message is already being heard in the heart of Government, but my hon. Friend's continued advocacy for Cornwall makes the point that, while it is perhaps one of the most beautiful parts of the United Kingdom, it also contains areas that desperately need Government and private sector investment and support for citizens to flourish.

Covid-19: Government Contracts

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): If he will make it his policy to publish all Government contracts relating to the covid-19 outbreak. [900578]

Michael Gove: It is already Government policy to adopt and encourage greater transparency in their commercial activity. Of course, central Government buyers must publish all their qualifying tender documents and contracts with a contract value over £10,000 on Contracts Finder. We recognise, however, that there have been delays to publishing some covid-19-related contracts, and teams continue to work on publishing them as soon as possible.

Mr Dhesi: Seventy-two per cent. of covid-related contracts awarded between February and November 2020 were reported after the 30-day legal deadline, with £7.4 billion-worth of that total reported more than 100 days after the contract was awarded. In comparison, it took Ukraine, which was trying to deal with a major conflict at the same time, less than one day to publish information on more than 103,000 covid contracts. I appreciate that the Good Law Project, EveryDoctor and other activists have taken the Government to the High Court, which confirmed that the Government acted unlawfully, but is it because of incompetence or because they are so imbued in cronyism that the Government lag so far behind on transparency? When will all public contracts finally be published?

Michael Gove: All contracts will be published. As I mentioned earlier, we are doing our very best to do that. I would say two things. First, the hon. Gentleman talks about cronyism. There is no evidence of that. What there is evidence of is people in the public sector and in Government working incredibly hard to make sure that personal protective equipment and other goods were there at the frontline. I am sure that on reflection he will consider that that particular choice of language might need revisiting.

Secondly, on the point he makes about Ukraine, one of the things the Department for International Development and others were doing in the past was making sure that we invest in civil society capacity in Ukraine. I am delighted that Ukraine is making strides forward, but that is partly thanks to the work done by my right hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt), working with others, when she was Secretary of State for International Development.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster said in the last Cabinet Office questions:

“Transparency drives everything that the Government do”.— [Official Report, 25 March 2021; Vol. 691, c. 1039.]

However, research by Transparency International found that 20% of the UK’s PPE procurement between February and November last year raised one or more red flags over possible corruption—there are too many secrets. Will the Government now restore public trust and publish all communications between Ministers and their business contacts over these PPE contracts? Will they publish the details of all the contracts that were awarded in the VIP lane and end the secretive emergency contracting?

Michael Gove: The emergency contracting procedure, to which the hon. Lady refers, was one that was used by every Administration across the United Kingdom, including the Labour Administration in Wales, and that was because of the pressures that all of us were under. I remember Front Benchers from the Labour party pressing us at an earlier stage in the pandemic, quite rightly, to move even faster to secure that PPE. But, of course, even as we were moving more quickly to secure it, there was a seven-step process supervised by civil servants in order to make sure that procurement was handled appropriately. If the hon. Lady has any specific cases where she feels that the process was faulty, I look forward to hearing from her about them, but so far there have been no specific charges from her. More broadly, I welcome emphasis on greater transparency overall.¹

Civil Service Apprenticeship Targets

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with relevant stakeholders on apprenticeship targets for the civil service. [900580]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): I have been having lots of discussions with relevant stakeholders on apprenticeship targets. We must do much better on getting more apprentices into the civil service.

Robert Halfon [V]: Will my right hon. Friend consider ensuring that all new recruits to the civil service are offered apprenticeships? Will he also make certain that, unless there are specific related reasons, all Government sector employment contracts have at least 5% of employees as apprenticeships before they are offered any contract by Government?

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend makes a very important point. We are currently reviewing, as part of preparation for new procurement legislation, exactly how we can ensure that there is a higher proportion of apprenticeships in contracts that Government allocate as well as making sure that the civil service extends the use of apprenticeship schemes, of which he has been such an effective champion.

Ministerial Code: Potential Breaches

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): If his Department will make it its policy to allow publication of the conclusions of recent independent investigations into potential breaches of the ministerial code. [900583]

1. [Official Report, 7 June 2021, Vol. 696, c. 1MC.]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): The independent adviser on Ministers’ interests publishes an annual report setting out the work he has undertaken.

Layla Moran [V]: This week, the Home Secretary said on “The Andrew Marr Show”:

“I think at this stage...this isn’t about breaking codes and things of that nature. We’re all just getting on in government doing very difficult jobs actually.”

Given that the ministerial code sets out an overarching duty on Ministers to comply with the law, does the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster agree that even if a Minister does have a difficult job, they should both follow the ministerial code and obey the law?

Michael Gove: That seems to me a very good point—yes.

Digital Services across Government

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to improve digital services across Government. [900585]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): The pandemic must be a catalytic moment when we use digital transformation to sharpen up how we deliver services to citizens and drive leaner, more efficient and, indeed, more insightful Government.

Andrew Jones: The past year has accelerated the digital marketplace very significantly and people are much more familiar and comfortable with doing business online. From a Government perspective, the efficiencies and service resilience have been obvious, so will my right hon. Friend ensure that all Departments across Government focus on improving digital access wherever possible, focusing not only on simplicity and security for users, but in the back office where significant savings may be made?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is spot on. He is absolutely right that the digital transformation of government should make it easier for citizens to interact with Government, and to receive services quickly—everything from the renewal of passports to making sure that they can book appointments—but it is also the case that back-office functions in government can be made even more efficient through the effective deployment of GDS’s superb cadre of civil servants. He has championed this quite rightly and I hope to work with him in future to make sure that we do even more.

Office for Veterans’ Affairs

Dehenna Davison (Bishop Auckland) (Con): What recent steps the Office for Veterans’ Affairs has taken to support the interests of veterans. [900586]

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans (Leo Docherty): The Government and the Office for Veterans’ Affairs are committed to delivering the veterans strategy. By doing so, we will establish a gold standard of care and opportunity for veterans in the UK. We will address historical issues that have negatively impacted some

groups of veterans and we will ensure that all veterans are celebrated for their skills, their courage and their magnificent contribution to our national life.

Dehenna Davison [V]: It is a real pleasure to hear from my hon. Friend at the Dispatch Box for the first time since he took his post. Will he join me in thanking all our veterans who have committed their lives to protect and defend us, and to whom we will always owe a debt of gratitude? Will he confirm that it will be the Government's unwavering ambition to ensure that the UK becomes the best place in the world to be a veteran, whether that veteran resides in Brighton, Buckie or indeed Bishop Auckland?

Leo Docherty: I can absolutely confirm that that is our ambition. I look forward to publishing the updated veterans action plan later this year. May I put on record my thanks for my hon. Friend's magnificent work in Bishop Auckland to celebrate the important role of veterans in her community?

Topical Questions

[900625] **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): Yesterday I had the opportunity to talk to the First Ministers of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in order to advance plans for a meeting with the Prime Minister to discuss the vital importance of covid recovery. I was grateful for the constructive work across the United Kingdom.

Mentioning that conversation gives me the opportunity, which I am sure the whole House will want to share, to thank Arlene Foster for her leadership as First Minister of the Northern Ireland Executive. Arlene will be stepping down shortly. She is a lovely, wonderful person who has done an amazing job. She is a brilliant advocate for the people of Northern Ireland. I know that we will all wish her very well for the future.

Christine Jardine [V]: We have all heard already this morning about the importance of levelling up in our covid recovery, but in constituencies such as mine, Edinburgh West, it is also important to reinforce and remind people of the strength and support available from the UK Government. Does the Minister for the Cabinet Office agree that it is vital that we remain focused on that and on recovery, and that we do not get side-tracked by the SNP's damaging obsession with independence?

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady puts the case in absolutely the right way: we need to focus on recovery. It was good to hear the First Minister stress in our conversation yesterday that she appreciated that that was a priority. I know that people in Edinburgh completely find the hon. Lady's arguments compelling, which is why her colleague and friend Alex Cole-Hamilton secured more than 50% of the first preference votes for Edinburgh West in the Scottish Parliament; obviously it was for a different party from my own, but it is a reflection of the fact that he and she are really good local representatives.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, following yesterday's Wagnerian-length Committee session, the proper place for learning

from the pandemic will be in the independent public inquiry announced by our right hon. Friend the Prime Minister? Given that the chair of that inquiry will require the confidence of the nation—and not least that of this House—does the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster agree that that chair should be subject to a pre-appointment scrutiny hearing by the relevant Select Committee?

Michael Gove: I am a great fan of Wagner, but I also recognise that the young tenor voice of my hon. Friend as Chairman of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee is one that deserves to be heard in the debate about how the inquiry should go forward. How exactly that voice is heard and amplified, and as part of which chorus, will be a matter for the whole House, I think.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I welcome the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster to our first exchange at the Dispatch Box, but I only wish that it were in better circumstances. The testimony that we heard yesterday has left families across the country wondering what happened to their loved ones and how they died. It has left all of us fearing that the Government have not learned the lessons or taken the action needed to prevent more avoidable loss.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster once said that he had

“reluctantly but firmly”

concluded that the Prime Minister was

“not capable of...leading the party and the country in the way that I would have hoped.”

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster knows Dominic Cummings very well as his former chief of staff—better than anyone else in this House. Does he believe him to be a credible and truthful witness?

Michael Gove: First, may I welcome the right hon. Lady to her place? She is someone who started her working life on the frontline of social care, who has been a highly effective trade union representative and who has spoken passionately and movingly in this House about the need for greater social mobility and educational reform, and it will be a pleasure, I hope, to work with her over the weeks and months ahead.

As far as yesterday's testimony went, people will make their own judgment on everything that was said then. I would say only two things. It has been a privilege to work closely with both the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Health over the course of the last 12 months. They have given unstinting service. It is thanks to their leadership, for example, that we have a world-beating vaccination programme, and it is a privilege to serve alongside them. I think the Prime Minister is doing a fantastic job, and I also think the Secretary of State for Health has shown unstinting—

Mr Speaker: Order. Can I just say that topical questions should be short and punchy? They are not for making statements. Of course we all welcome the right hon. Lady to the Front Bench, but we really need to get answers to the questions that have been posed.

Angela Rayner: I thank the Minister for his comments, but learning the right lessons could save lives and the truth matters to us all, so can he tell us which, if any, of the claims made by Dominic Cummings he is now prepared to refute at the Dispatch Box?

Michael Gove: I have not had the opportunity to read all the evidence that was given yesterday, and indeed the Speaker has enjoined brevity on me, but I think that the public inquiry that we have been discussing is the right place to review all the evidence from every individual.

[900626] **Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): Everyone, no matter where they grow up, should have access to the same opportunities in life. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that a key part of the levelling-up agenda will be to improve teaching and provide support for schools and skills programmes in disadvantaged areas, to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to reach their full potential?

Michael Gove: That is exactly it. My hon. Friend is completely right.

[900628] **Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): There are real concerns that bereaved parents who lost their children to the contaminated blood scandal could be omitted from future compensation packages for victims, as they were with the ex gratia payments. I have written to the Paymaster General about this. Please will she meet me and the Smith family, who tragically lost their son Colin, aged just seven, after he was infected with blood from Arkansas prison? This is about acknowledging their loss, and it is the very least they deserve, given the injustices that they have endured.

The Paymaster General (Penny Mordaunt): I would be very happy to meet the hon. Lady and any of the victims of this appalling scandal. I raised this issue at the recent meeting of the all-party parliamentary group on haemophilia and contaminated blood, and I want to let all those people who have lost children know that just because we published the written ministerial statement, which made reference to other support for other individuals, that does not mean that they are not at the forefront of our minds. The compensation study that we recently announced will obviously be looking at many of the issues that they have raised, but I would be happy to meet them.

[900627] **Chris Green** (Bolton West) (Con): Following Lord Pickles' report "Securing the ballot: review into electoral fraud", I introduced a ten-minute rule Bill to support the introduction of voter ID. Will my right hon. Friend do all he can to ensure that this will be delivered by the local elections next year? Furthermore, he can be reassured of the support of Bolton West's vibrant LGB, trans, BAME and working-class communities for this effort, because it might surprise Labour that they actually participate in the modern world.

Michael Gove: It is a great ten-minute rule Bill, Bolton West is a wonderfully vibrant and diverse community, it has a brilliant local MP, and we are on it.

Mr Speaker: And Bolton Wanderers got promoted.

[900631] **Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): Earlier this week, the Conservative party finally published the much delayed Singh report on Islamophobia and discrimination within its own ranks. The report is a damning indictment, but the findings come as no surprise. The poison of Islamophobia continues to rise unabated in our society and the latest hate crime figures reflect this, yet for years the Government have refused to meaningfully engage with the Muslim Council of Britain. Will the Minister

correct this and meet me and the MCB to discuss what action is required to truly root out Islamophobia from our society?

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. The Singh report—of which I have not read every word—is clear about the steps that we need to take to root out anti-Muslim prejudice, and it is absolutely critical that we do so.

[900629] **Duncan Baker** (North Norfolk) (Con): It is inevitable that, as we continue to unlock, we will see the odd pocket of covid hotspots and variants spread throughout the country, so will my right hon. Friend say now that, wherever possible, we will try to use local, well-communicated, regional measures to suppress those hotspots so that, thanks to the fantastic vaccination roll-out, we can avoid at all costs delaying the road map and ensure that we keep away from national restrictions?

Michael Gove: That is a very thoughtful point with which I completely agree.

[900633] **Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP) [V]: I congratulate the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster on being one of the few Ministers in the thick of things somehow to avoid being mentioned in Mr Cummings' evidence to the Select Committees yesterday. Nevertheless, the "About us" section on the Cabinet Office website starts:

"We support the Prime Minister and ensure the effective running of government."

Given what Mr Cummings said about the chaos at the heart of this Government, will the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster commission an independent inquiry into the operation of the Cabinet Office during the pandemic?

Michael Gove: The broad public inquiry that we have set up—with, of course, consultation with the First Minister of Scotland—will, I hope, look at every aspect of our pandemic response. Although I did not hear all the evidence history, I understand that I was mentioned and the point was made that I got some things wrong. I have got lots of things wrong, but of course we will all reflect on those in due course.

[900630] **Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): My right hon. Friend highlighted earlier how levelling up is central to the Government's agenda. I have seen it portrayed as a north-south question, but it is not: there are left-behind communities right across the United Kingdom and there are left-behind pockets within communities such as towns and cities that would equally qualify. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that he is working right across all Government Departments to ensure that the commitment to levelling up is reflected in their policy agendas right across the UK?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We heard earlier from my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) about the particular challenges in Cornwall. Challenges exist across the United Kingdom, and as part of our levelling-up drive we are committed to meeting them.

[900645] **Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab) [V]: The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster knows that politics is a question of priorities. The Government

have insisted that they simply cannot find the money to give our NHS heroes anything more than a 1% pay rise, but in the past year the same Government have spent £250 million on unusable facemasks, £133 million on faulty testing kits and £2.6 million on a briefing room at No. 10. The Government's priorities are all wrong, are they not, Minister?

Michael Gove: I do not think so, but the hon. Gentleman raises an important point: we should thank those at the frontline of the NHS for the amazing work they have done. Part of supporting them is making sure that they have the right personal protective equipment. This Government, like Governments around the globe, were under great pressure to make sure that we had the right PPE in the right places at the right time. More than 99% of the PPE that we procured was directed, usable and effective.

[900632] **Holly Mumby-Croft** (Scunthorpe) (Con): My right hon. Friend will know that the UK steel sector is interconnected and that removing steel safeguards on certain products could affect UK steel businesses and jobs. At this crucial time for the UK steel industry, will he outline what steps his Department is taking to promote the use of our world-class UK steel in Government projects and down the supply chain?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes an important point. There is a proud tradition of steelmaking in Scunthorpe and she is absolutely right to draw attention to the importance of the issue. My colleagues in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy have established a new joint industry and governmental steel procurement taskforce, which was launched on 12 March. Of course, as the Government Department that helps to co-ordinate procurement, we are working with BEIS to achieve the goals that my hon. Friend rightly points out on behalf of her constituents.

[900649] **Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab) [V]: I was rather taken aback by the Minister saying earlier that the Government are doing all they can to support small businesses. The collapse of the construction giant Carillion in 2018 saw 780 businesses go into insolvency, while the thousands that survived—including that of Neil Skinner, whose business is in my Oldham constituency—averaged losses of more than £140,000. If the Government had implemented project bank accounts, they would have prevented many of the losses. Given that, and the Minister's response to my written questions, why is the Cabinet Office no longer monitoring the extent of the use of PBAs across Government?

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady raises an important point and I look forward to the opportunity to perhaps meet her to discuss exactly how we can improve the way in which the Cabinet Office supports small businesses.

[900634] **Alexander Stafford** (Rother Valley) (Con): As my right hon. Friend knows, I am a strong proponent of the enormous new benefits that Brexit brings all of Yorkshire in international trade and funding, which we see more and more every day. Will he give his thoughts on what Brexit means for Yorkshire in the long term, particularly what it means for Rother Valley?

Michael Gove: Rother Valley is a centre of enterprise in South Yorkshire, and it contains brilliant businessmen such as Mr Don Wightman, who is a manufacturing

superhero. He, like his Member of Parliament, recognises that the new trade opportunities that Brexit brings, and indeed the new opportunities for smarter regulation, mean that enterprises in Rother Valley and across Yorkshire have a very bright future.

[900651] **Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff West) (Lab): Perhaps the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster should have read the warning signs when Dominic Cummings used to sign in at his Department, when he was Secretary of State for Education, under the name Osama bin Laden. That might have been the moment when he could have dealt with the issue. On the right hon. Gentleman's responsibility on public appointments, what is going on with that of Ofcom chair? We read in the paper today that, apparently, the appointment process has been scrapped and is to be restarted because Paul Dacre failed under the current rules, so those rules are being rewritten so he can apply a second time and be appointed.

Michael Gove: Public appointments to Ofcom are of course a matter for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. I should say that the hon. Gentleman would be a superb chair of Ofcom, given the range of experience that he brings. That would mean, sadly, having to stand down from his position in the House, but I think we would all welcome that sacrifice for the greater good.

[900635] **Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): Yesterday, Mr Cummings said the Prime Minister was not fit for office and had been lying. I believe and support the Prime Minister. Does the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster agree that the Prime Minister is right, or Mr Cummings?

Michael Gove: I think the Prime Minister is absolutely right. I think my right hon. Friend has been doing a great job as Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. Looking at the last 12 months—everything we have done from the roll-out of the vaccine programme to the support that we have given those on the frontline—we should celebrate the fact that, at a time of challenge, we have in the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care a dedicated public servant.

[900636] **Caroline Nokes** (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con) [V]: Changing Faces has convinced the Welsh Government to sign up to its Pledge To Be Seen campaign on including people with visible differences and disfigurements in Government publications. Will my right hon. Friend consider doing likewise so that Government information campaigns across the UK are as inclusive as possible?

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend is a great champion of widening opportunity and has done a fantastic job in ensuring that equality is taken more seriously across Government. The campaign that she mentions is absolutely right, and something that I will ensure we embrace in Government publications.

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

10.32 am

Sitting suspended.

Speaker's Statement

10.35 am

Mr Speaker: Before I call Jonathan Ashworth to ask his urgent question, I remind the House that “Erskine May” states:

“Good temper and moderation are the characteristics of parliamentary language.”

Although the context in which particular phrases are used is important, “Erskine May” also says that there are certain expressions that,

“when used in respect of other Members...are regarded with particular seriousness, generally leading to prompt intervention from the Chair and often a requirement on the Member to withdraw the words”.

One example is making a charge

“of uttering a deliberate falsehood.”

In other words, Members should not accuse other Members of lying. Depending on the context, it may well be in order to quote the views of others, but Members should not themselves state or imply that other Members are lying. There are ways that such issues can be debated in the House by means of a substantive motion, but not as part of an urgent question.

Covid-19: Government Handling and Preparedness

10.36 am

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, if he will update the House on the pandemic preparedness of the Department of Health and Social Care.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): What we have done to handle this coronavirus pandemic has been unprecedented in modern times. Throughout, we have been straight with people and this House about the challenges that we as a nation face together. The nation, in my view, has risen to these challenges. Of course, there were unprecedented difficulties that come with preparation for an unprecedented event.

This pandemic is not over yet. Our vaccination programme has reached 73% of the adult population, but that means that more than a quarter still have not been jabbed; 43% of adults have had both jabs, but that means that more than half are yet to get the fullest possible protection that two jabs give.

Yesterday, we saw 3,180 new cases of coronavirus—the highest since 12 April—but thanks to the power of vaccination, in which I have always believed, the link from cases to hospitalisations and deaths is being severed. About 90% of those in hospital in hotspot areas have not yet had both jabs, so the continued delivery of the vaccination effort and the ongoing work to control the virus through testing, tracing and isolation are vital.

Yesterday, we saw the opening of vaccinations to all those aged 30 and above. I am delighted to tell the House that the vaccination programme is on track to meet its goal of offering a jab to all adults by the end of July. It has met every goal that we have set. Setting and meeting ambitious targets is how you get stuff done in Government.

As a nation, we have many challenges still to come. I know, and one of the things I have learned, is that the best way through is to work together with a can-do spirit of positive collaboration. The team who have worked so hard together to get us this far deserve our highest praise. I am proud of everyone in my Department, all those working in healthcare and public health, the armed forces who fought on the home front, the volunteers who stood in cold car parks with a smile, colleagues across the House who have done their bit and, most of all, the British people. Whether it is the science, the NHS or the people queuing for vaccines in their droves, Britain is rising to this challenge. We have come together as one nation, and we will overcome.

Jonathan Ashworth: Families who lost loved ones will have noticed that the Secretary of State, in his opening remarks, did not respond to any of the specific allegations from yesterday—allegations that are grave and serious: that the Prime Minister is unfit for office; that his inaction meant that tens of thousands needlessly died. We had allegations from Dominic Cummings that the Secretary of State, specifically, misled colleagues—an allegation from Mr Cummings, Mr Speaker—on our preparedness and lack of protection for people in care homes.

The allegations from Cummings are either true, and if so the Secretary of State potentially stands in breach of the ministerial code and the Nolan principles, or

[Jonathan Ashworth]

they are false, and the Prime Minister brought a fantasist and a liar into the heart of Downing Street. Which is it? Families who have lost loved ones deserve full answers from the Secretary of State today. Is he ashamed that he promised a protective shield around care homes and more than 30,000 care home residents have died? Why were 25,000 elderly people discharged from hospitals into care homes without any test? Did he tell Downing Street in March that people discharged from hospital had been tested, even though it was not until 15 April that there was a requirement for testing to take place?

In public, the Secretary of State has often claimed that little was known of asymptomatic transmission at the time, so testing was not necessary, but the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies in January flagged evidence of asymptomatic transmission. A study in *The Lancet* in February flagged it. On 5 March, the chief medical officer said that

“there may well be a lot of people who are infected and have no symptoms”,

so why did the Secretary of State not insist on a precautionary approach and test all going into care homes?

On 6 May, at the Dispatch Box, the Secretary of State claimed that it is

“safer for them to go to a care home.”

Yet 12,000 people had died in those early months. How could he justify that comment? In April, he told the House:

“What is important is that infection control procedures are in place in that care home”.—[*Official Report*, 19 May 2020; Vol. 676, c. 494.]

However, care homes, like the NHS, struggled with the most desperate of personal protective equipment shortages. He was telling us in March from the Dispatch Box that supplies were extensive, but apparently in private, in Downing Street, he was blaming Simon Stevens for the lack of PPE.

The reality is that the Secretary of State and his Department were responsible for PPE, and the National Audit Office report said that the supplies were inadequate. Some 850 healthcare workers died. How many could have been saved had they had PPE? Families lost loved ones and have been let down by the Government, the Prime Minister and the Health Secretary, but the truth matters. Those families and the country deserve clear answers from the Health Secretary and the Prime Minister today.

Matt Hancock: The allegations that were put yesterday and repeated by the right hon. Gentleman are serious, and I welcome the opportunity to come to the House to put formally on the record that these unsubstantiated allegations around honesty are not true, and that I have been straight with people in public and in private throughout. Every day since I began working on the response to the pandemic last January, I have got up each morning and asked, “What must I do to protect life?” That is the job of a Health Secretary in a pandemic.

We have taken an approach of openness, transparency and explanation of both what we know and what we do not know. I was looking at it this morning. Since last January, I have attended this House more than 60

times. With the Prime Minister, we have together hosted 84 press conferences. I have answered 2,667 contributions to this House and answered questions from colleagues, the media and the public, and we will keep on with that spirit of openness and transparency throughout. As well as coming to the House today, I will answer questions and host another press conference later.

Sometimes what we have had to say has not been easy. We have had to level with people when it has been tough—when things have been going in the wrong direction. Also, we have learned throughout. We have applied that learning both to tackling this pandemic and ensuring that we are as well prepared in the future as possible, but beyond all that what matters remains the same: getting vaccinated, getting tested, delivering for our country, overcoming this disease and saving lives. That is what matters to the British people.

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con): The House should know that when serious allegations were made at yesterday’s joint Committee hearing, we asked for evidence to be provided, and until such evidence is provided, those allegations should be regarded as unproven. In the meantime, we are in the midst of a pandemic, and we need the Health Secretary to be doing his job with his customary energy and commitment.

I want to ask my right hon. Friend about comments made by Neil Ferguson on this morning’s “Today” programme. He said that the Indian variant is now dominant in the majority of local authority areas and, indeed, is the dominant variant, and that the opening date of 21 June is now in the balance. Given how desperate businesses up and down the country are to return to normal, what additional measures can my right hon. Friend take in the short term to ensure that, in terms of surge testing, the vaccine roll-out and improvements to Test and Trace, we really are able to open up as everyone wants on 21 June?

Matt Hancock: It is true that the Indian variant is spreading across the country, and estimates vary as to what proportion of new cases each day involve that variant first identified in India, which is more transmissible. My assessment is that it is too early to say whether we can take the full step 4 on 21 June. Like my right hon. Friend, I desperately want us to do so, but we will only do that if it is safe. We will make a formal assessment ahead of 14 June as to what step we can take on 21 June, and we will be driven by the data and advised on and guided by the science, and we will be fully transparent in those decisions, both with this House and with the public. That is the approach we have taken, that is the approach he and his Select Committee would expect, and that is what we will deliver.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP) [V]: In Dominic Cummings’ opening statement yesterday, he said:

“The truth is that senior Ministers, senior officials and senior advisers... fell disastrously short of the standards that the public has a right to expect of its Government in a crisis like this. When the public needed us most,”

we “failed.” We then heard a litany of evidence that the disease was not taken seriously in February last year, further compounded by the ignoring of SAGE advice to lock down in September, resulting in a worse second

wave. Does the Health Secretary agree that the UK Government failed the public? Had he acted sooner, how many lives could have been saved or restrictions avoided? Will he act urgently to prevent further unnecessary suffering and death in the immediate future by holding a comprehensive public inquiry immediately?

Matt Hancock: I have been working on the pandemic since January of last year—before the disease was even evident in this country. That is when we kicked off work on the vaccine, and I was told at first that it would typically take five years to develop a vaccine. I insisted that we drove at that as fast as we possibly could, and I am delighted at the progress that we have been able to make.

Of course it is right that we learn from everything that we understand and everything that we see and all the scientific advances. We should do that all the way through. This idea that we should wait for an inquiry in order to learn is wrong, but it is right that we go through all that happened at the appropriate time in order to ensure that we are best prepared for the inevitable pandemics of the future.

Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con) [V]: I thank my right hon. Friend for his visit to the Royal Cornwall Hospital in Truro earlier this week. We met staff, toured the site of the new oncology wing and looked at the start-of-the-art plans for the new women and children's hospital—part of our manifesto promise for 40 new hospitals.

Given the gravity of the situation that the Government faced at the beginning of the pandemic, and considering we now know that Dominic Cummings was a hugely disruptive force, I congratulate Ministers, not least my right hon. Friend, on staying focused on the evidence presented by the experts at the time as events changed quickly. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that he will ignore unsubstantiated Westminster gossip and stay focused on delivering the vaccine roll-out and our manifesto promises?

Matt Hancock: I think that is what the public expect us to do. I had a brilliant visit to Cornwall on Monday. It was a pleasure to go to Treliske to see my hon. Friend there and to talk about the new women and children's hospital that we are building as part of the biggest ever investment in healthcare in Cornwall. Delivering on these priorities on which we were elected, and of course dealing with this pandemic and keeping people safe, is what the public want to see. That is what the expectations of the public are and it is my total focus.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con) [V]: There was no manual to guide Governments going into this new global pandemic and most people feel that the Government responded as well as anybody could. In particular, over the past six months government has worked well together to deliver a phenomenal amount of testing and one of the best vaccine roll-outs in the world. Is the Secretary of State aware of anything that has changed during that time to help the way that government has worked on improving the covid response?

Matt Hancock: All I would say to my hon. Friend is that it is very difficult responding to an unprecedented challenge of this scale, but over the past six months people have seen that governing has become a little easier and we are being able to deliver.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab) [V]: In February, I called for localised, community-based vaccination centres, and I want to pay tribute to Dr Helen Wall, Bolton's clinical commissioning group, the NHS and volunteers for the roll-out of the vaccine. Last week, my constituents were wrongly accused of vaccine hesitancy, and then we had a quasi-lockdown that no one knew about and many people's travel plans were thrown into chaos. My constituents can forgive the Government for that, but I am sure I speak for the country when I say that we cannot forgive the fact that:

“Tens of thousands of people died, who didn't need to die”.

Those were the chilling words of Dominic Cummings. Will the Secretary of State tell me when the Prime Minister and others will be investigated by the police for alleged corporate manslaughter? Why did we not follow the example of New Zealand, where they managed to control the virus with a minimum number of deaths?

Matt Hancock: What I would say to the people of Bolton is that they have again risen to this challenge. The number of vaccinations happening in Bolton right now is phenomenal—tens of thousands every single day.¹ It is heartening to see the queues of people coming forward both for testing and for vaccinations in Bolton. This has not been an easy pandemic anywhere, but it has been especially difficult in Bolton. In particular I want to pay tribute to the leadership of Bolton Council and Councillor David Greenhalgh, who has done such a remarkable job in very difficult circumstances.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con) [V]: I thank my right hon. Friend for visiting North Devon District Hospital this week, where he personally thanked the wonderful staff and discussed future development plans. While this Government have worked tirelessly to save lives and protect our NHS, Labour has spent the past year flip-flopping over curfews, lockdowns, schools and our borders, and I am sure he shares my disappointment that even now the Labour party is still more interested in playing politics than working constructively with us. So may I seek his reassurance that as we emerge from the pandemic he is committed to lowering NHS waiting times and improving access to vital GP services, as he continues to make sure that everybody who need care gets care?

Matt Hancock: Absolutely I am. GP access, in particular, is very important. This morning, I met the British Medical Association and the BMA GP leadership to talk about what more we can do to strengthen access to GPs. These are the sorts of things that matter to our constituents, as does the new hospital that we are going to build in my hon. Friend's constituency. It was a wonderful visit to Devon on Tuesday, and it has been great going around the country to look at what we can do to invest further in the NHS, strengthen it and support it to deliver better care. North Devon does not have a better champion than my hon. Friend. As for what she said about the Opposition, all I can say is that sometimes the right hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) offers constructive criticism, he has generally had a good crisis and perhaps he will return to that approach soon.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD) [V]: In the words of the Prime Minister's former chief adviser:

“Quite the opposite of putting a shield around them, we sent people with covid back to the care homes.”

1. [Official Report, 7 June 2021, Vol. 696, c. 2MC.]

[Munira Wilson]

If that is true, this is one of the biggest scandals and tragedies of the pandemic. Can the Secretary of State please confirm when testing on discharge from hospitals into care homes was routinely offered? Will he apologise to the tens of thousands of bereaved family members whose relatives died in care homes?

Matt Hancock: It has been an incredibly difficult time for those who have worked in and lived in care homes throughout this pandemic. That has been true across the world, and I pay tribute to the staff in social care who have done so much. It was, of course, a difficult challenge, especially at the start when many characteristics of this virus were unknown. As I have answered many times in this House, we have published full details of the approach that we are taking and that we have taken. We have worked with the care home sector as much as possible to keep people safe and followed the clinical advice on the appropriate way forward.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): May I take the Secretary of State back to what he said in his statement about the B1617.2 variant first discovered in India, which I think will be of the most concern to my constituents and the country in the days and weeks ahead? We are bound to see an increase in cases as we open up; that is inevitable. The important thing is breaking that link between cases, hospitalisations and deaths. My understanding of all the current evidence is that our vaccines are very effective in stopping serious disease, including from that B1617.2 variant. If that remains the case, does he agree that, on 15 June, there would be no reason not to go ahead with opening up fully on 21 June? That is the important question to which we need an answer.

Matt Hancock: That is literally the most important question to which we do not yet have a full answer. The data that we have suggest that, in the hotspot areas, around one in 10 of those in hospital are people who have had both jabs. That is a function both of the protection that we get from the vaccine against this variant and also of the age profile of those who are catching the disease. Those who have not been vaccinated include those who are old enough to have been offered the jab and those who have not yet been offered the jab. The fact that 90% of the people in hospital are those who have not yet been double vaccinated gives us a high degree of confidence that the vaccine is highly effective, but the fact that 10% of people in hospital have been double vaccinated shows that the vaccine is not 100% effective. We already knew that, but we are better able to calibrate as we see these data. We will learn more about this over the forthcoming week or two before we make and publish an assessment ahead of 14 June about what the data are saying about taking the step that is pencilled in for not before 21 June.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for all that he has done to deal with the coronavirus disease and for the roll-out of the vaccine. My mother-in-law died last year from the virus. On Monday, she was taken to hospital, and five days later we lost her. I want to put it on record that we do not blame anybody, but we miss her every single day.

There are those in Northern Ireland who have questions to which they need answers. Our Prime Minister has committed himself to an inquiry, and the Secretary of State has committed himself to that inquiry. I want to ensure that those people from Northern Ireland who have lost loved ones and who have sincere questions can ask their questions—they do not want to blame anybody—and get an answer. Will the Secretary of State assure us that people from Northern Ireland who have those questions can and will be part of that inquiry?

Matt Hancock: Yes, of course. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman, like me, will welcome the fact that this morning Northern Ireland has been able to open up vaccination to all adults over the age of 18, showing the progress that we are able to make working together with the UK vaccination programme and local delivery through the Department of Health in Northern Ireland. Of course the inquiry must and will cover the entire United Kingdom. In the three nations that have devolved Administrations, of course it will have to cover the activities both of the UK Government and of the devolved Administrations. Exactly how that is structured is yet to be determined and it will be done in consultation with the devolved Administrations. But as he rightly says, it is vital that we use the inquiry to ensure that people can ask questions and get answers in all parts of the United Kingdom.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con) [V]: Everyone recognises that lessons can be learned as a result of this pandemic and we do not necessarily need to wait for the inquiry to take place. Does the Secretary of State share my view that integration of health and social care is critical and would absolutely be a lesson to be learned from the pandemic? I was delighted to welcome him to the Isles of Scilly on Monday—the first visit of a Health Secretary, we understand, at any time. Will he affirm that the model that we are developing on the Isles of Scilly to integrate health and social care and improve the outcomes for everyone living there is right for the islands but also a model that could be used elsewhere across the United Kingdom?

Matt Hancock: Yes, absolutely. It was an enormous pleasure to go to the Isles of Scilly on Monday morning. I did not know that I was the first Health Secretary ever to visit the Isle of Scilly, but frankly it is so wonderful that I would really quite like to be back there before too long. The integration of health and social care that my hon. Friend mentions is happening on Scilly. It is important on Scilly, but it is actually a lesson for everywhere. I have discussed it with the new Conservative-led Cornwall Council—the first ever majority Conservative-led Cornwall Council. The team there and on the Isles of Scilly are doing a great job of integrating health and social care. Scilly, in particular, needs investment in its health infrastructure and support because it is more remote than almost anywhere else. We will deliver these things. Throughout the length and breadth of this country, we will invest in the NHS and integrate health and social care. The Isles of Scilly could hope for no better advocate than my hon. Friend.

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba) [V]: Yesterday's revelations have only served to reinforce what many have suspected: a tale of chaos, deception, dishonesty and failure, including the reckless suggestion

of herd immunity and chickenpox parties. While so many watched aghast, the Secretary of State chose to respond to these very serious allegations by claiming he had been too busy saving lives to even bother. My enduring memory of the Secretary of State yesterday will be of him quite literally running away from his responsibilities.

I want to focus on one vitally important matter that emerged yesterday regarding deaths in care homes. Did the Secretary of State, as alleged, categorically tell Mr Cummings and unspecified others that people would be tested before being transferred into care homes? If he did not, why then was transfer without testing the adopted policy across England and the devolved Governments, including Scotland? On 17 October last year, I asked the Secretary of State to consider tendering his resignation. Surely if all these allegations are substantiated, he must do so.

Matt Hancock: So many of the allegations yesterday were unsubstantiated. The hon. Gentleman's most important point was that the Scottish Government, with their responsibilities for social care, had to respond to the same challenges and dilemmas as we did, as did other countries across Europe and across the world. We were driving incredibly hard as one United Kingdom to increase testing volumes. We successfully increased testing volumes, including through the important use of the 100,000 testing target, which had a material impact on accelerating the increase in testing, and because of this increased testing we were able to spread the use of tests more broadly. It was the same challenge for the Administration in Edinburgh as it was here in Westminster, and the best way to rise to these challenges is to do so working together.

Mr Speaker: We have a connection problem with the line to Dr Andrew Murrison so we will go straight to Caroline Lucas.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green) [V]: The families of the bereaved deserve better than the grotesque pantomime of the Cummings evidence session yesterday. At the very least, they deserve the publication of the internal lessons learned review. A constituent of mine whose father died from covid acquired in hospital wrote to me to say that the refusal to release it is

“an insult to bereaved family members, who, in the midst of our own suffering, are determined to prevent other families from experiencing the loss we have”.

She is right because the big question is not just about mistakes the Government made last March, but why Ministers never learn from those errors and continue on a path that risks lives and livelihoods. The Secretary of State says he is being straight with the public and this House, so as continued Government negligence risks a third wave of the pandemic, will he finally publish that review urgently, not least so that it can be scrutinised before restrictions are due to be lifted next month?

Matt Hancock: Of course, we learn lessons all the way through and we follow the scientific developments that teach us more about this virus all the way through, and then we will also have a full inquiry afterwards to make sure that we can learn further lessons for the future. The thing I did not quite understand about the hon. Lady's question is why she did not refer to the single most important programme that is saving lives, which is

the vaccination programme. She should be urging her constituents and others to come forward and get the jab because that is our way out of this pandemic.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): Thanks to this Government and the vaccine taskforce led by Kate Bingham, it is Britain that has led the way in vaccinations and it is Britain that has given so much to the world through our vaccination technology and innovation. Globally, over 1 billion jabs have now been given, most of them Pfizer, Moderna or Oxford-AstraZeneca, and it is this Government who backed Oxford university with over £60 million of funding to give the gift of hope to the world. So may I thank the Secretary of State for his efforts and his remarkable achievements in this regard, and may I ask him when he thinks the Teesside vaccine, Novavax, will be approved by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency?

Matt Hancock: The last point is very tempting, but I will leave it to the independent regulator to make that decision and determine its timing—but we are all very excited about the progress of the Teesside vaccine, as my hon. Friend calls it, the Novavax vaccine. He is also right to raise the point about vaccinations around the world. The UK can be very proud of having played such a critical role because of the investment we made in the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine right at the start of this pandemic, and because we decided together with Oxford university and AstraZeneca to make this vaccine available at cost around the world. I can give the House an update: over 450 million doses of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine have now been deployed around the world at cost. That is the single biggest gift to the world that we could make with respect to vaccines. It is because of the attitude that the Government took, working with one of our greatest universities and working with one of our greatest industrial partners. It is another example of the big team effort that is helping in this case the whole world get out of this pandemic.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab) [V]: At Prime Minister's Question Time in July, I raised concerns of a care home owner in Bedford who was told as late as 21 May that, if she refused to accept the return from hospital of a covid-positive patient, they would be discharged to an unfamiliar home. I know the Secretary of State is desperate to dismiss Mr Cummings' version of events on care homes, but to do so would mean calling the care home owner a liar. Who is responsible for the high numbers of unnecessary deaths: the Health Secretary or the Prime Minister?

Matt Hancock: As I said, we have answered this question many times before. What I would add to those answers is that it is another example of constantly learning about the virus. As we learned the impact of asymptomatic transmission in particular, we changed the protocols in care homes over the summer and put in place the winter plan that led to a greater degree of protection in care homes over the second peak. We are constantly looking to make sure that we can learn as much as possible and work with the sector to help people to stay as safe as possible.

Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con) [V]: Mr Speaker, “When it comes to the Health Secretary, I'm a fan.”

[Mark Logan]

Those are not my effusive words; they come from some of the highest levels among our health team in Bolton. Like colleagues on both sides of the House, we have been on countless calls with the Health Secretary, with upwards of 100 MPs on many occasions. As he has done today, he has taken the time to respond or come back after each and every interaction with helpful advice and solutions. I say this in private, I say it in public, and I say it—this is a plug—in the “Red Box” in *The Times* today: these last two weeks, he has thrown his Department’s kitchen sink at Bolton to help us through the recent variant-driven spike. Can he provide an update on the current situation, as well as giving a continued commitment to work hard for Bolton?

Mr Speaker: I presume it’s your red box the hon. Gentleman refers to, Secretary of State.

Matt Hancock: There are issues around Bolton in my red box very regularly, Mr Speaker. I was waiting on tenterhooks to find out whether, as well as his constituent being a fan, my hon. Friend is a fan—maybe he can tell me later in private. But he makes a very serious point: we have a significant challenge in Bolton right now, with a high rate of covid transmission, and we have done everything we possibly can to support Boltonians to solve this problem with increased vaccination. It is great to see the huge enthusiasm for vaccination and the queues of people coming forward. I say to everybody in Bolton, “Please come forward if you have not had both jabs yet.” Also, the testing effort, which has seen people come forward and get tested, is helping us to break the chains of transmission. That is the approach that we are trying to take now that we have built this huge vaccine and testing infrastructure over the past few months.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab) [V]: The Secretary of State claims that he has always been straight, yet his response to my question last week suggests otherwise. Remember, he was not straight over the need for higher-grade FFP3 masks for our frontline NHS and care workers, he was not straight over the need for the public to wear masks at the start of the pandemic, and he has not been straight over Test and Trace, for example with his fabricated test numbers last April. Given yesterday’s revelations, however, will he apologise to Warwickshire families for the 344 excess deaths resulting from his decision to discharge hospital patients directly into our care homes?

Matt Hancock: I do not recognise those figures, but I do recognise the enormous challenge of keeping people safe in care homes at the height of a pandemic in unprecedented circumstances. The other thing that I would say is that in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency we are building one of the biggest testing laboratories, if not the biggest, that this country has ever seen. The ability to have this huge testing capacity is an asset that this country has. It will mean not only that we can help to tackle the virus now, spot the new variants and make sure that we have an understanding of where it might be popping up—such as in Bolton, for instance—but that we are better prepared in future. I would like to work with the hon. Gentleman to deliver this brilliant laboratory in Leamington Spa and make sure that it is a model for how we do diagnostics. That working together is the best approach that we can take.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con) [V]: How does my right hon. Friend account for the yawning difference between the account given to the Select Committee yesterday and rehearsed by the Opposition today, and the balanced and objective accounts that continue to be given by the National Audit Office on this pandemic, notably the one published earlier this month detailing the Government’s response to the pandemic? May I ask specifically how he will take forward one of the principal recommendations of that report—that we need to plan for a sustainable healthcare workforce that can be organised at pace in the event of a future emergency of this sort, and that we particularly need individuals who are properly skilled and updated to fill gaps that may arise as a result of a future pandemic?

Matt Hancock: My right hon. Friend is quite right on both points. Not only have we been transparent and accountable to this House, and straight with this House about the challenges, but we have welcomed the National Audit Office into Government throughout the pandemic, and it has published repeatedly. For instance, it published on personal protective equipment, showing that we successfully avoided a national outage of PPE. It has reported on every aspect of the pandemic, and we have learned the lessons that are in those reports. I recommend to the House the National Audit Office’s latest publication, which summarises all these lessons and learnings. My right hon. Friend is absolutely right that one of those is making sure that we have high-quality workforce planning for the future.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): Has my right hon. Friend noted the various ironies of yesterday’s Committee? It must be personally difficult for him and others who needlessly defended someone so willing to throw them into the road—presumably a road full of those behind the wheel testing their eyesight. But is not the greater irony the strange epiphany in many who have gone from regarding the Prime Minister’s former adviser as a latter-day King Herod whose words and deeds could not be trusted, to regarding him as a prophet who, fresh from the wilderness, brings with him supposed truths written on tablets of stone? Irony of ironies, all is irony.

Matt Hancock: I think what the constituents we serve are looking for is a Government who are focused four-square on delivering for them, getting us out of this pandemic and building back better. Observations on ironies I will leave to my hon. Friend.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP) [V]: Delaying a public inquiry until 2022 could lead to the rewriting of memories, the potential loss of key documents and a lack of full transparency on the decisions that were taken based on the evidence. Given the seriousness of the testimony of Mr Cummings, including that statement, the scale of the disaster is so big that people need to understand how the Government failed them and learn from it. Does the Secretary of State agree that we need a quicker start to a public inquiry than the Government currently plan?

Matt Hancock: No.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): What do we know about the Secretary of State? We know that he is exceptionally hard-working, and that every day he woke

up to try to save lives. He has been exceptionally good at coming to the House and answering questions. He has also held press conferences and answered questions from journalists. Yet yesterday, we had some outrageous claims by an unelected Spad who broke covid regulations, admitted he had leaked stuff to the BBC, and by his own admission was not fit to be in No. 10 Downing Street. Does the Secretary of State agree that the only mistake the Prime Minister made in this pandemic was that he did not fire Dominic Cummings early enough?

Matt Hancock: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for that question. I will continue to compliment him while I think of how to respond. The honest truth is that, from the start, I have been totally focused on how to get out of this pandemic. It is absolutely true that the operation and functioning of Government has got easier these last six months, and I think all the public can see that. We are laser focused on getting through this, getting this country out of it and delivering the vaccine programme that we have now been working on for almost a year and a half, which is remarkable. I pay tribute to all those who have been working on this effort. The way to fight a pandemic is by bringing people together and inspiring hope.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab) [V]: Five hundred and nineteen residents in my borough of Tower Hamlets have lost their lives to covid—in my own family, we have lost five of our relatives—and their family members are grappling with that loss to this day. The hearings yesterday were incredibly distressing. Mr Cummings has admitted to Government failures in handling the pandemic, and said that it meant “tens of thousands of people died who did not need to die”.

Out of respect for the over 128,000 families of people who have lost their lives, will the Secretary of State admit to the failures today and apologise? Will he, instead of his simple no to the earlier question, bring forward urgently the date of the inquiry, because families like ours, those of my constituents and all those who have lost loved ones up and down the country deserve answers now and deserve for lessons to be learned so that these mistakes are never made again?

Matt Hancock: The pandemic has taken far too many people away far too soon, and that has happened in the hon. Member's family and it has happened in mine. She is absolutely right that we need to ensure that we learn as a country how to prepare as well as we possibly can for pandemics in the future—because it is likely that pandemics will become more frequent, not less—and it is vital that people have the opportunity to get answers. We must learn the lessons all the way through, not just wait until afterwards, and we must have a full inquiry afterwards, so that we can ensure that every detail is assessed and everybody has the opportunity to ask those questions. I think that is the right approach.

Mark Fletcher (Bolsover) (Con): On Sunday, I had the absolute joy of going to the Winding Wheel in Chesterfield and receiving my first vaccine. Will my right hon. Friend thank all the volunteers and staff at the Winding Wheel for what they have been doing? Can he tell me what monitoring has been happening at the Department of Health of an outbreak of opportunism

and revisionism that seems to be spreading through Opposition politicians? If it helps, I have an idea of who patient zero might be for that outbreak—Captain Hindsight, if you will.

Matt Hancock: I am absolutely delighted my hon. Friend has had his first jab; I did not know he was old enough yet. It is very important that you take decisions in government based on the information that you have at the time. Of course, you can go and assess things based on information you have afterwards, but you can only take decisions on the information that you have, and that is why an unprecedented crisis like this leads to unprecedented challenges, and what you have to do is tackle those challenges as best you possibly can.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab) [V]: At the start of this pandemic, covid-19 was seeded into care homes by a discharge policy that required care homes to take asymptomatic patients. A letter from Kent and Medway CCG to care providers dated 26 March 2020 made it clear that they were asked to take such patients whether they had been tested or not. Yesterday, the joint Select Committee inquiry heard that the Prime Minister was told by the Secretary of State that testing would be in place for these patients. I am asking quite specifically: did he know that the discharge process did not require testing, and did he sign off this policy, which led to thousands of avoidable deaths of vulnerable people and many deaths of care staff?

Matt Hancock: I have answered this question many times, and the challenge is that we had to build the testing capacity. At that time, of course I was focused on protecting people in care homes and in building that testing capacity, so that we had the daily tests to be able to ensure that availability was more widespread. That is at the heart of the importance of the then 100,000 target, and we are now up to a position where we have millions of tests available per day.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): Surely it cannot be in anyone's interests, least of all those who are mourning loved ones, for the mob to descend and judge and preoccupy my right hon. Friend at this point in the pandemic. The Government have made clear that there will be a full public inquiry, and that is when hindsight can and should prevail. Now, surely, it is in all our interests that he gets on with his work, bringing his experience to bear on saving lives and carrying out this excellent vaccination programme. Will he meet a cross-party delegation of West Midlands metropolitan leaders who are keen to work with him to deliver those common objectives?

Matt Hancock: Yes, those are common objectives. The way my right hon. Friend puts it is absolutely spot on. I would be delighted to meet him and west midlands leaders to ensure we can roll out the vaccination effort as quickly and as effectively as possible in order to both save lives and get us out of this pandemic.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Is the Secretary of State aware that, by and large, many of us who have been in Parliament for a long time prefer Select Committee inquiries to public inquiries, because we get a faster and sharper look at a problem while the

[Mr Barry Sheerman]

evidence is fresh? I know he has been very good at coming back quickly to Members of Parliament, including myself in Huddersfield in Kirklees. However, last week was not as good as possible. It seemed that he did not give us a heads-up and we were very much taken aback by the new advice given to local authorities like mine.

One last point: the fact of the matter is that this pandemic and these viruses have not gone away. The disturbing thing that came out of yesterday's evidence was that there seemed not to have been any national plan for this sort of emergency. Every local authority has an emergency plan. Have we now got one?

Matt Hancock: Of course, we have learned a huge amount about how to respond to a pandemic. We have built assets and capabilities such as the vaccination programme and the testing, which is so important both to protect people directly and break the chains of transmission, and to understand where the virus is spreading.

I am glad that we cleared up the issue the hon. Gentleman raised with respect to Kirklees. I worked with colleagues in Kirklees and elsewhere while I was in the west country to make sure that we got the best possible solution to the need in Kirklees: to have a turbocharge on the vaccination programme, to have mass testing to break the chains of transmission, and for people to be cautious and take personal responsibility as we lift measures to make sure that things stay under control.

I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for what he said about me personally, and for the leadership he has shown in his community.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con) [V]: Yesterday, our Committee meeting was supposed to be about lessons learned. In that spirit, we know that the World Health Organisation stated on 14 January that there was no human transmission. On 11 February, the WHO actually named the virus. We then know that on 14 February, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, in update No. 4, stated that the risk to health systems in the EU and the UK was “low to moderate” and the risk to the population was “low”. We also know that the UK had a plan, but it was mainly based around flu, not brand new viruses. Look at where we are now. Is not the biggest lesson learned that we need a global response and a global resilience plan? Will the Health Secretary be pushing the Prime Minister to make that case at the G7, when we host it here in the UK in June?

Matt Hancock: I think that is one of the lessons. I do not need to push the Prime Minister on that; he is absolutely seized of the point. We will be developing the work on that next week at the Health Ministers G7, which is being held in Oxford, and then, of course, at the leaders' summit which is being held in Cornwall later next month. My hon. Friend is absolutely right in the view he takes as to the importance of reforming and strengthening the global institutions, as well as learning the lessons here at home.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): The Secretary of State spoke earlier about the donation of surplus vaccines and other PPE and medical equipment to India and other developing countries. How does that square with the Government's determination to cut their overall contribution to international aid? Are those donations being counted towards the 0.7% or 0.5% targets and, if they are, can he assure us that that will not be to the detriment of other projects that were already committed towards those targets?

Matt Hancock: Of course we are donating items directly—for instance, to India, Nepal and others—but the single biggest global contribution that the UK has made is the Oxford vaccine, which is being delivered at cost by AstraZeneca around the world following funding from Oxford, AstraZeneca and the UK Government. That has already led to 450 million jabs globally, two thirds of which are in low and middle-income countries. Everybody, in all parts of this country, should be proud of that, and there was Scottish support in the development of that vaccine. Of course, we will do as much as we can within the official development assistance budget directly, but that decision to waive the intellectual property charge has been called for from others—from President Biden down—but it is something that we in this House and the whole country should be very proud of.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): The vaccine roll-out is going really well in my area and I cannot help but note that the turning of the tide against covid, because of that roll-out, seemed to exactly mirror the turning of the year. Is not it the case that, far from the world being divided into people who are either useless or brilliant and the British state failing at every turn, we have a Government in this country who did their best and a public who came together, as always in the UK, when the chips were down?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend, who was a superb Health Minister, has captured not just the spirit of what this country has been through in the last 18 months, but the spirit of the debate today in this House. The truth of the matter is that we work best when we work together, and we work together when we have a common mission, and the common mission has been tackling this virus. It is absolutely true that we must always do that with an open mind on how to do it better in future, but, in my view, the attitude needed is one where you welcome people in and take things forward in a spirit of positive partnership. That is how you get stuff done, and that is how we have made the progress we have been able to make.

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

11.32 am

Sitting suspended.

Agricultural Exports from Australia: Tariffs

11.35 am

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for International Trade, if she will make a statement on the United Kingdom's proposed tariff offer to the Australian Government on their agricultural exports.

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): Our trade agreement with Australia is very likely to be the first from-scratch deal that we have struck outside the European Union. It is a major milestone for global Britain and a major prize secured for our newly independent trade policy. It is on course to slash tariffs on iconic UK exports, saving business potentially about £115 million a year.

The deal will be the most advanced that Australia has struck with any nation bar New Zealand, and will, we expect, be particularly forward-leaning in areas such as services, procurement and digital trade. It will be a great deal for the UK, and our farmers will continue to thrive. The agreement is a gateway into the massive CPTPP—comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership—free trade area in the Asia-Pacific, and opens doors for our farmers into some of the biggest economies of now and the future.

Our food is among the best in the world and incredibly competitive. We should be positive, not fearful, of the opportunities that exist for our agriculture and our farmers. We give the EU preferential trading terms, which I do not recall those on the Opposition Benches objecting to. We should be unafraid of giving our Australian cousins something similar, taking the chance to deepen trading ties with one of our closest friends and allies.

Australian meat is high quality and produced to high standards, and it arrives here in low volume. Meanwhile, Australia has some of the highest animal welfare standards in the world. The UK accounts for just 0.15% of Australian beef exports, and our analysis suggests that any increase in imports is more likely to displace food arriving from the EU. Any deal we strike will contain protections for our farmers, any liberalisation will be staged over time, and any agreement is likely to include safeguards to defend against import surges. Negotiators are now working to agree the outstanding elements with the aim of reaching agreement in principle in June.

This is not the end of the process. Later this year, Parliament will be given ample opportunity to scrutinise the agreement—we welcome scrutiny of the agreement—as well as any legislative changes that may be required before the agreement enters into force. Parliamentarians will also receive an independently scrutinised impact assessment. Mr Speaker, you will know that our scrutiny arrangements are among the most robust, and in line with other parliamentary democracies. Indeed, in some areas we go further still.

This will be a great deal for our United Kingdom. It will deliver big benefits for both countries and will help us build back better from the covid pandemic. I commend it to the House.

Emily Thornberry: Let me make it clear at the outset that we support a trade deal with Australia that is designed in British interests and will create jobs in our economy and increase our exports and growth. What we

cannot support is a deal being rushed through in time for the G7 summit without proper debate or consultation, let alone the advance scrutiny that the Government promised by the Trade and Agriculture Commission. We cannot support a deal on agricultural tariffs that will cost jobs in our farming communities, undercut our food standards, increase our carbon offshoring and open the door to the destruction of our farming industry through further lopsided trade deals.

As an exercise in intellectual honesty, I would just ask all those on the Conservative Benches, in the right-wing think-tanks and on the newspaper comment pages to consider for one second how they would have reacted if it was Brussels that had negotiated this trade deal and sold out Britain's farmers. They would have been rightly furious, and they should not be any less so when it is their own Government who are doing the selling out. However, what matters now is to try to improve the deal on the table before it is signed in Cornwall.

Assuming that it is now too late to remove the offer of zero tariffs, can I ask the Minister of State to pursue three other changes? First, will he put in place a safeguard trigger—which, as I am sure he knows, Australia was willing to accept in its deals with Japan, China and the United States—to protect British farmers against surges in cheap imports? Secondly, will he make it clear that zero tariffs will apply only to Australian products that meet the same standards that British farmers are required to meet on food safety, animal welfare and environmental protections? Thirdly, will he insert a review clause into the deal so that, if its impact is even more negative than was forecast by the Government last year, there is scope both to amend the deal and to learn from it in future trade deals? Those are the bare minimum changes that we need to mitigate the damage that this rushed and botched negotiation is inevitably going to do, so I hope that the Minister of State will agree to pursue all three of those priorities today.

Greg Hands: I thank the right hon. Lady again for tabling this question. Let me answer each and every one of her questions. First, she said that this had been rushed through. I was at the Department at its inception in the summer of 2016, and one of the very first things that was announced in 2017 was our target for our initial batch of free trade agreements, which included Australia. That was back in 2017 and repeated by the current Secretary of State in 2019. She talked about the Trade and Agriculture Commission. This will be up and running soon—[*Interruption.*] If she is that keen to see it up and running soon, she might have supported the passage of the Trade Bill, which became the Trade Act 2021 just before Easter; instead, we saw her repeated manoeuvres to delay and undercut the Bill at the time.

The right hon. Lady talked about any deal potentially undercutting our food standards. I was absolutely clear in the statement that there will be no compromise on our standards of animal welfare, food safety and the environment. That is our manifesto commitment, and it has often been repeated. She made a point about emissions and food miles. There is controversy in relation to meat production emissions, but no more than 5% of emissions are reckoned to come from the transportation across oceans of that product.

Let us look at Australia's current trade patterns. Only 0.15% of Australian exports come to the UK. Australia sells 75% of its beef and 70% of its lamb into Asia at the

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moment. That is where the fast-growing markets are, and that is something that we in the UK are seeking to get access to ourselves through agreements such as the CPTPP and other trade agreements. There is a big opportunity here for UK agriculture.

The right hon. Lady asked about a safeguard trigger. As I said in my opening statement, safeguard triggers are typical of free trade agreements. This is still a free trade agreement that is subject to a live negotiation, but I would say that these things are typical of free trade agreements. She asked if we would have zero tariffs if the Australian produce met our standards. The Australian lamb and beef coming into the market today meets our standards. There will be no change as a result of the free trade agreement to our standards. Australian beef and lamb will continue to have to meet our import standards. If that is the only objection to zero tariffs, I take it that she would welcome such a situation if there were zero tariffs in the deal. She also asked about a review clause. Again, that is a typical feature of free trade agreements.

The right hon. Lady has to explain why she is seemingly so opposed to such a trade deal with Australia, a key Commonwealth, Five Eyes and like-minded trade ally of the United Kingdom. She did not complain about the zero-tariff, zero-quota access for EU beef and lamb, which had no staging on it at all. Why does she do so for Australia? I believe her real problem is that she still wants to remain in or rejoin the EU, like her neighbour the Leader of the Opposition, and cannot see the benefits of doing any trade deal with Australia. I commend the prospective deal to the House and invite more progressive voices on the Opposition Benches to join us in backing an FTA with our close friends and allies.

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con): We have all heard much in recent days about the threat posed by large-scale, low-cost Australian meat production, but we all know that consumers care about quality. What opportunities does the Minister see in a free trade agreement with Australia for the hill farmers of Aberconwy, whose grass-fed stock can run freely across the rain-soaked hills of north Wales, breathing in the clean mountain air?

Greg Hands: My hon. Friend is a doughty champion for his constituents in general and his farmers in particular. There are great opportunities worldwide for the Welsh lamb sector. For example, British lamb is currently not allowed at all in America. We are looking at fast-growing Asian markets, and I refer back to the importance of the Australia deal as a springboard to CPTPP. Half of today's global middle class is in Asia, and almost 90% of the next billion middle-class people in this world will be in Asia. That is where the growing demand for high-quality meat, such as the Welsh lamb produced by my hon. Friend's constituents, can be found, and that is where I see great prospects and great opportunities for his constituents, his farmers and farmers across the United Kingdom.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP) [V]: Everybody wants more trade deals to be done, but the Minister simply is not listening to those at the sharp end. Martin Kennedy, president of the National Farmers Union Scotland, said:

“Our seafood industry has already been hit hard by Brexit and now Scottish farming is next to be sacrificed—and once again it's Scotland's key industries which will bear the brunt of a Tory Brexit people here did not vote for”.

NFU England has warned Ministers that farmers will struggle to compete if zero-tariff trade on lamb or beef went ahead. The RSPCA has warned that tariff-free access for Australia would betray the public, farmers and animals. Those are just some of the warnings to Government from those affected, not from politicians. Will the Minister rule out tariff-free access for Australian agricultural produce?

Nothing must threaten our actions to mitigate climate change. Australia is home to large energy and mining firms and has lagged behind other advanced economies when it comes to addressing climate change. Will the Minister guarantee that no deal with Australia will include investor-state dispute settlement mechanisms, or will he press ahead and betray not only today's public, farmers and animals, but those of future generations?

Greg Hands: It is always good to hear from the hon. Gentleman. I noticed in his series of questions that there was, for example, no mention of the £113 million-worth of Scotch whisky sold into Australia at present that is subject to 5% tariffs. Australia is actually the eighth largest market by volume for Scotch and has been growing at 7% per annum. There was no mention of the opportunities for Scottish financial services, FinTech or agrifood more generally—we actually have an agrifood trade surplus with Australia.

The hon. Gentleman quotes NFU Scotland, which has great people. I have met Martin Kennedy personally twice in the last week, as well as the Scottish Government to discuss the prospect of this deal.

Let me reiterate: there will be no change in our standards as a result of this trade deal. We are absolutely committed to no compromise on our animal welfare, food safety or environmental standards.

The hon. Gentleman asked me to rule out tariff-free access to Australian agricultural products. There already is tariff-free access through an autonomous tariff rate quota. I think he seeks a rolling back of the trade arrangements we already have with Australia.

The hon. Gentleman asked about ISDS. It is a live negotiation, and there will be a chapter on investment. We are huge investors in each other's markets, and I remind him that the UK has never lost an ISDS case.

However, the hon. Gentleman has serious questions to answer, too. Never in 20 years has the SNP supported any trade deal done by the UK or even by the EU, even though key sectors of the Scottish economy, such as whisky, apparel and fisheries, are dependent on our trade. SNP Members voted for a no-deal Brexit. They voted against deals with our friends, such as Canada, South Korea and South Africa. They did not support deals with Japan or Singapore. Whatever assurances I have given him today, or whatever turns out to be in the deal, I do not think it would make him and the SNP support this deal. When it comes to trade, the SNP is isolationist and against the best interests of Scotland.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): With the proposed free trade agreement with Australia potentially removing tariffs on all UK exports to Australia, does my right hon. Friend agree that that will save businesses across

the United Kingdom millions of pounds—including in Buckinghamshire—support jobs across the nation, boost exports on products such as whisky, gin, cars and cheeses, and bring huge benefits to our agriculture sector?

Greg Hands: I know how important my hon. Friend's agriculture sector is in Buckingham, and I can say that the deal we are trying to secure will be very beneficial to exporters of whisky, biscuits, cars, cheese, apparel, ceramics and gin, including gin makers in his constituency such as Foxdenton, Bucks Brothers and Butlers Cross.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): To support its agricultural industry, Australia has the highest rate of deforestation in the OECD and uses 71 hazardous substances that are currently banned in the UK. It is also one of the worst performers in tackling climate change, so how are the UK Government using the offer of zero quota and zero tariff access to persuade Australia to improve performance in this area?

Greg Hands: We are the COP26 chair this year, and we look forward to full Australian participation. The Australian Government are absolutely committed to combating climate change. There may even be something on that in this agreement, which we are negotiating at the moment. In terms of where Australia is overall on our standards, it is worth bearing in mind that it does have high animal welfare standards. It is ranked five out of five by the World Organisation for Animal Health on its evaluation of the performance of veterinary services, and it is worth pointing out that Australian standards are high, but I repeat that there will be no compromise and no change as a result of this free trade agreement to our own food standards.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The Australian free trade agreement is a key step forward for both global Britain and the Indo-Pacific pivot, as well as a stepping stone towards a successful trans-Pacific partnership application. There are wide opportunities for Britain with a key member of the Commonwealth family, but does my right hon. Friend agree, first, that hormone-injected beef is illegal in this country, wherever it comes from? Secondly, does he agree that a combination of staggering the introduction of tariffs and targeted DEFRA assistance will ensure that upland farmers do not suffer in the alarmist way suggested by anti-free trade Opposition parties?

Greg Hands: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Hormone beef will remain illegal, because we will not be changing our import standards. I do not believe that this deal represents a fundamental threat to UK farmers, and it certainly does not compromise our high standards. As has already been pointed out, any changes for sensitive goods, such as beef and lamb, can be staged. A typical Australian free trade agreement has stages over 10, 12 or 15 years. He is right that there is an opportunity here: a springboard to CPTPP, which I know he understands well as our trade envoy to many parts of south-east Asia.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP) [V]: Farmers in my constituency produce first-class beef to the highest standards both environmentally and in terms of animal welfare, at considerable cost to the family farm. Does the Minister think it is fair to pitch these farmers

against Australian farmers and their intensively produced imports, with lesser standards and great environmental impact?

Greg Hands: I thank the hon. Lady for that question. In fact, I have met the Ulster Farmers Union twice in the past week to discuss these issues in particular. I met Diane Dodds, the Northern Ireland Economy Minister yesterday, and I am meeting Edwin Poots, the Northern Ireland Agriculture Minister, later today, so we are doing extensive outreach within Northern Ireland.

I would point out to the hon. Lady the huge opportunities for the Northern Irish agriculture sector. The very first beef exported to the United States last year came from Foyle Food Group in Northern Ireland. There are great opportunities for companies such as Moy Park as well in Northern Ireland to be able to export more. We are absolutely confident of being on the front foot, and ensuring that Northern Ireland also benefits from our free trade agreements, as it is written into the Northern Ireland protocol, and is able to sell more of its high quality meat into markets all around the world, including to the CPTPP 11.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con) [V]: Free trade has mutual economic benefits, for not just producers, as we have been discussing, but consumers, who get more choice. We must not lose sight of that. As the Minister said, the understanding is that the proposed free trade agreement with Australia would be a gateway to joining the CPTPP, which is a high-standards free trade agreement of 11 Pacific nations. Does he agree that doing so will mean lower tariffs for British exports to those markets, which will be an incredibly beneficial economic opportunity for British businesses?

Greg Hands: My hon. Friend is absolutely right on the CPTPP. He is also right to focus on consumers, who are a vital part of our trade agenda. Under the CPTPP, 95% of tariffs between members will be removed. We already do £110 billion-worth of trade with the CPTPP. It has very liberal rules of origin, gold-standard data and digital rules, a small and medium-sized enterprise chapter, and very favourable conditions for business visas as well. It will be a great agreement for the UK, and a key stepping stone to get there is this free trade agreement with our great friends in Australia.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): In an answer to me last Wednesday, the Prime Minister lectured Welsh farmers that they should be selling their beef and lamb to China and the United States. He seemed unaware of one minor detail: that we do not have a trade deal with either country. When will Welsh families be able to sell their lamb and beef to China and the United States, and what should Welsh farming families do in the meantime as the Government trash their income with this bad Australia deal?

Greg Hands: Again, we have done extensive outreach in Wales in recent times. I have met twice with both NFU Cymru and the Farmers' Union of Wales. I also met with the Welsh Minister Vaughan Gething just yesterday. There are already British exports of beef and lamb to China, and of beef to the United States. I mentioned the first consignment of beef arriving last year. Getting our lamb into the United States is one of

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the key priorities of our trade agenda moving forward, but the China example shows that we do not always have to have a free trade agreement to be able to open doors for our high-quality agricultural produce. We have opened doors for British beef into Japan and British pork into Taiwan in recent years as well.

Matt Vickers (Stockton South) (Con): Alongside our farmers, car manufacturers such as Nissan play a key role in constituencies such as mine, helping to secure high-skilled jobs and to create new opportunities for people across Stockton South and the north-east. In 2019, Nissan UK exported around 10,000 cars to Australia and another 10,000 in 2020. What impact might the free trade agreement with Australia have on UK car manufacturers such as Nissan?

Greg Hands: My hon. Friend is right: 10,000 cars go from Sunderland alone each year to Australia. That is a big volume of cars and a big amount of receipts as well. Cars make up just under 8% of all UK exports to Australia. They currently attract a 5% tariff. We are looking to reduce or remove that tariff in the agreement, and I look forward to making progress precisely on that issue to bring joy to his constituents soon.

Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (Alba): Over 200 years ago during the highland clearances, people were shamefully replaced by sheep, for landlords' profits. Now this trade deal threatens the supplanting of those sheep by cheap imports, for Tory dogma. What does it say about the Tory Government that they do not even care about Scottish sheep, let alone Scottish crofters and farmers?

Greg Hands: Well, let me say a few things about that. We have to understand the existing trade flows in beef and lamb from Australia. We have to understand the beef prices. Production costs in some of those Asian markets are twice those in the UK, which makes it very competitive for Australia to sell into markets such as Japan and Korea, where the domestic production price of beef, for example, is twice that in the UK. The Australian lamb quota for the UK is not even fully used at the moment.

Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con) [V]: Compromising on the high food standards we enjoy here in the UK must never be allowed; that is something on which we must never compromise. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that a free trade agreement with Australia will not allow hormone-fed beef into the UK, and that it will never be allowed to enter the UK under any free trade agreement?

Greg Hands: I can absolutely confirm that hormone beef will not be allowed into this country, and there will be no compromise, according to the manifesto that my hon. Friend and I stood on in December 2019—no compromise on our high standards of animal welfare, food safety and the environment—but that does not prevent us from importing produce from Australia. We already receive Australian beef and lamb. It is high quality, and I believe strongly that Australia will continue to sell good, high-quality produce to this country, which of course must continue to meet our unchanged import standards.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance) [V]: I recognise that the Minister is keen to highlight new markets for UK agrifood producers. However, the EU will remain by far the UK's largest partner in food exports and imports. To what extent will any free trade agreement with Australia complicate or even preclude a UK-EU veterinary agreement on sanitary and phytosanitary issues, which surely should be a greater priority for the Government to assist UK food exporters and to address some of the tensions around the Northern Ireland protocol?

Greg Hands: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question. He is right that the EU will remain a large and important trading partner for us, particularly in agriculture. On his question about what impact an agreement with Australia would have, look, there will be no change to our standards as a result of the FTA—no change to our import standards. It should not have any impact on the EU.

We already have a comprehensive free trade agreement with the EU, which is the trade and co-operation agreement, and I should point out that the EU has an extensive veterinary agreement with New Zealand. That agreement is of great interest in terms of it recognising the equivalence of New Zealand's veterinary outcomes. I do not see any danger in a free trade agreement with Australia with respect to being able to maintain our trade with the EU.

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): Without doubt, farming is one of Britain's finest industries, and we all want to ensure that British food production has the best opportunities available to it, so will my right hon. Friend explain the role that the newly created Trade and Agriculture Commission will play in scrutinising the free trade agreement? Will he also comment on the opportunities the FTA will create in Australia for our British food producers, as well as in the wider Asia-Pacific?

Greg Hands: My hon. Friend is right: this is about opportunity for the UK overall, and specifically for agriculture. It is a gateway to joining CPTPP. New trade deals will bring new export opportunities to British farmers. Global demand for beef and lamb is soaring. We should be wanting to fill part of that global demand. Meat consumption is projected to rise nearly 73% by 2050, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I simply do not understand the Government's logic: good-quality British farming undermined, high animal welfare standards compromised, jobs and livelihoods bartered away—all for no financial gain to British farmers, but at significant cost to our climate. Will the Minister assure me that he will not sign any trade deal with Australia until he has satisfactorily answered the five challenges that Minette Batters of the National Farmers Union has set out today, which have the full support of farmers—first protecting their interests, rather than his own?

Greg Hands: I have already spoken about climate and the Australian Government's commitment to the Paris accord, which we warmly welcome. We work very well together with Australia on environmental issues. On standards, I have already answered: there will be no compromise on our standards. May I say something about Australian animal welfare standards, as they sometimes get a little maligned in the press? They are

ranked five out of five by the body concerned, the World Organisation for Animal Health—the OIE. Australia already sells naturally-grown beef and lamb into the UK. Our import standards will remain the same after the deal as before. For example, any hormone-grown beef would not meet our import standards.

Robert Largan (High Peak) (Con): Businesses across the High Peak would welcome a trade deal with Australia, and the opportunities and jobs that that would bring. Will my right hon. Friend reassure the hill farmers of the Peak District, who, as we all know, produce the world's best quality lamb, that their interests will be safeguarded and that the Government remain committed to the UK's world-leading animal welfare standards, food standards and environmental protections?

Greg Hands: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I do not know of a bigger champion of his local farmers in the High Peak than him. He is right to say that there are opportunities here in exporting for his local farmers. I have already mentioned the US, where British lamb is currently not allowed in at all. Again there is big, fast-growing Asian demand for high-quality meat and the UK will be seeking a piece of the action by joining CPTPP, which I know will bring benefit to his excellent local farmers.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP) [V]: A huge number of constituents have written to me with deep concerns that the Government will sell out our standards for a trade deal. Although the UK is a world leader in sustainable farming and high animal welfare standards, Australian agriculture lags far behind. The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the Trade Justice Movement and Compassion in World Farming have voiced concerns that a deal with Australia would

“betray the public, farmers and animals”.

Chlorine-washed chicken, sow crates and battery-caged hens are all banned in the UK but are common practice in Australia. The Government have repeatedly promised that food standards will not be lowered in any trade negotiations, but can the Minister give a cast-iron guarantee and promise us that this tariff deal will guarantee that goods made to a lower standard will not be imported to the UK?

Greg Hands: I thank the hon. Lady for that question, and there is a cast-iron guarantee that our standards will not be compromised on. She is an SNP Member, so may I say to her that it would be high time for the SNP to start thinking about whether it will ever back any trade deals? It never backed any trade deals promoted by the European Union, let alone by the UK, and the SNP aspires to rejoin the EU. On Australian standards, she might want to have a word with RSPCA Australia. I have already pointed out that Australian animal health standards are rated five out of five. Australia has also banned some practices that are not banned in the EU, such as the castration of chickens or the production of foie gras. So if she sat down with the RSPCA Australia, it might give her a robust view of how good Australian animal welfare standards are.

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con) [V]: May I commend my right hon. Friend on the trade deals that have been secured so far? Can he

confirm that all these trade deals and the proposed one with Australia will add value to the UK economy without compromising existing trading arrangements with high-value, mature markets such as the EU, which are crucial to exporters in my constituency?

Greg Hands: My hon. Friend is right on that and he is right to highlight that this is not an either/or; this is not either we have trade with the EU or we have trade with non-EU trading partners. It is absolutely our objective, going back to the manifesto he and I were both elected on, to have 80% of UK trade to be covered by free trade agreements within three years. That includes the EU, but it also includes new trading partners. CPTPP represents 13% of GDP—that would rise to 16% when the UK joined—and it crosses four continents, including old friends such as Australia, Canada, Japan, Singapore and New Zealand, as well as growing markets such as Vietnam and Mexico, where there are great opportunities for us to sell more UK agricultural produce and other things into.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): When I met farmers in Luton South, they stressed to me the importance of trade deals not undercutting our food and animal welfare standards. In Australia, live farm animals can be transported over land for slaughter for up to 48 hours without rest—six times the limit that is currently allowed in Britain. On the grounds of both ensuring a level, competitive playing field and ensuring the humane treatment of farm animals, does the Minister think it is appropriate to reduce tariffs to zero on meat from animals that have been subject to that sort of cruelty?

Greg Hands: I refer the hon. Lady back to the fact that Australia is highly rated by independent bodies for its high quality of animal health, rated five out of five by the World Organisation for Animal Health, and our import standards would not change as a result of this or any other free trade agreement.

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): It seems that the animal welfare and food standards scaremongering is out in full force again. Does my right hon. Friend agree that given that Australia's food standards are better than the European Union's and that its animal welfare is equivalent to the United Kingdom's, a free trade agreement with us will have an absolutely negligible impact on our own high UK standards?

Greg Hands: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As we have said repeatedly, there will be no compromise on our own standards. I agree that Australia ranks very well overall. Obviously its standards are different, but overall its animal welfare standards rank extremely highly—five out of five. As I said, it banned practices that are prevalent in the EU, such as the castration of chickens and the production of foie gras. It is not a simple like-for-like comparison. The most important thing to note, though, is that our import standards will not be changed as a result of the deal.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I do just wonder whether the Minister is aware that New Zealand and Australia are actually different countries. Farmers in Wales are very concerned about this deal, and rightly so in Gower. What reassurances can he give that unilateral trade liberalisation with Australia will not set a precedent for future deals?

Greg Hands: I am well aware that Australia and New Zealand are different countries. As the parliamentary president of Conservative Friends of Australia, I am pretty familiar with our two great friends and allies on the other side of the world. I think the hon. Lady is exaggerating the threat, as she sees it, from Australian agriculture. Australia is already exporting hugely into Asia, which is where our opportunities lie as well. When it comes to British beef in our supermarkets, there is strong “buy British” branding in the UK, and I do not see that changing overnight. Some 81% of beef sold in the UK has either UK or other home nations branding, and 100% in many of our major supermarkets. I do not see that changing as a result of any trade deal.

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): I am sure my right hon. Friend will agree that these trade deals should not be seen as the end of a conversation but the start of an ongoing one. Can he assure my constituents in the Black Country and businesses in the residual supply chain that, going forward, they will be placed at the heart of his negotiating strategy and that of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Trade?

Greg Hands: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. In any trade deal, we have to look across the whole piece. His question is just about agriculture, but we should look at the other opportunities for the Black Country to benefit from—for example, 5% car tariffs and the huge amount of machinery sold by this country into Australia, including from Northern Ireland. There are other great opportunities in, for example, financial services, gin, vodka and cheese. Australian cheese tariffs can be as high as 21%. There are big opportunities for UK exporters not limited just to agriculture.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Farmers in Scotland and across the UK fear this trade deal with Australia could put them out of businesses and flood our supermarkets shelves with inferior-quality products. I know that the Minister rejects that and does not recognise those fears as being valid, so can he explain why it seems that our farmers and consumers simply do not understand how fabulous this deal is, or could it be that the Government are being disingenuous about the impact this deal will have on our farmers and our food?

Greg Hands: The hon. Lady used the word “disingenuous”, but I notice that, while she talks a good game about supporting British meat farming, her neighbouring SNP council, South Ayrshire Council, put out a tweet just recently encouraging residents to eat 75% less red meat. She cannot have it both ways: she cannot be encouraging less red meat consumption and then complaining about a trade deal that she thinks will import a lot more of it. I remind her that Scotland will benefit very strongly from this deal. I notice, again, that we do not hear anything from the SNP about Scotch whisky and the huge amount of other Scottish goods that we are selling in Australia through this deal.

Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con): Mr Speaker, the deep historical relationship that we have with Australia is perhaps exemplified by the fact that your Chair is a gift from Australia. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this agreement is an opportunity to deepen the relationship with our kith and kin in Australia and should be celebrated and championed and not denigrated?

Greg Hands: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I have relatives right the way across Australia. My aunt emigrated there—I cannot remember what they were called. Was it the ten bob poms?

Mr Speaker: The ten pound poms.

Greg Hands: The ten pound poms! Thank you, Mr Speaker. My aunt emigrated there in what must have been the late ‘50s. I have relatives there; many of us have relatives there. We have an incredibly strong and close relationship with Australia. It is not just about family and kinship; it runs across defence, security, culture and sport, and also trade. Australia is a major country when it comes to promoting global free trade. That is exactly the right place for this country to be in as well.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab) [V]: There is concern from farmers in Wales and across the UK who face the potential of losing out from an unlevel playing field as a result of this deal. Will the Minister publish a rigorous economic assessment of cumulative impacts on our farming communities if zero-tariff and zero-quota deals are agreed not only with Australia, but with other countries such as New Zealand, Canada, Brazil and others?

Greg Hands: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point. In the past week, I have met twice with NFU Cymru and the Farmers Union of Wales to discuss a particular point. Before each negotiation, we publish a scoping assessment, which, obviously, does not have any idea what may or may not be in the deal. It looks at the concept of the deal. We then publish an impact assessment, which we will be doing later this year, when we can see the text of the deal. We will be involving Parliament, in the way that we did when we set up the Trade and Agriculture Commission, and that will inform that debate going forward. That is the right way to proceed and I am confident that our scrutiny arrangements are absolutely robust.

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con) [V]: A free trade agreement between the UK and Australia is something that I welcome, as it can be of huge benefit to both our countries. We are the closest of friends and share so much in common. However, I share the concerns of farmers in Cumbria and across the UK that the FTA might damage our farming sector. It is important that Parliament is able to scrutinise these FTAs—something that is not happening with this deal. The Constitutional Reform and Governance Act process is insufficient and the much-welcomed Trade and Agriculture Commission that we all fought for is now not currently constituted and is therefore not looking at this deal. Will the Government commit to meaningful parliamentary scrutiny of this agreement and act to reconstitute the Trade and Agriculture Commission immediately, and also consider tariff-rate quotas as a sensible way of safeguarding the agreement?

Greg Hands: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. He is hugely knowledgeable of this sector, especially in relation to agriculture, and I respect that. I am pleased that he welcomes the deal overall. The deal is not done yet, which is the first important thing to recognise. There is no text in front of us to scrutinise. The reconstituted

Trade and Agriculture Commission will be set up soon and definitely in good time to scrutinise this deal. When it comes to safeguards, again that will be specified in the free trade agreement, but typically it will allow either party temporarily to increase tariffs or to suspend liberalisation in the event of an unexpected or unforeseen substantial increase in imports. Again, it is normal that, in a free trade agreement, those safeguards are in place.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Contrary to what the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) said, I am not a member of a right-wing think tank; I am the son of a farmer and I represent a farming constituency. Nevertheless, I am very supportive of any trade deal with Australia that maintains a fair and level playing field. Will my right hon. Friend set out what exact role the Trade and Agriculture Commission will play in making sure that that is the case?

Greg Hands: I thank my hon. Friend, not least for his expertise in this sector. The role of the Trade and Agriculture Commission is set out in statute in both the Agriculture Act 2020 and the Trade Act 2021. We are expecting it to be set up soon, and we also have to respond to the report from the original Trade and Agriculture Commission set up last summer. I would expect it to be a panel of experts who will provide this Parliament—both Houses—with expert insight into the terms of this or any other free trade agreement, particularly in relation to agriculture and standards.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP) [V]: Does the Minister appreciate that doing this deal with Australia would wreck the UK's reputation on environmental issues, since Australia has the highest rate of deforestation in the OECD, driven by the livestock industry, and Australian agriculture uses 71 highly hazardous substances that are banned in the UK, including neonicotinoids and hormone injections for beef? Does he think losing that reputation is a price worth paying for this trade deal?

Greg Hands: I am slightly surprised by the hon. Lady's question, and again I repeat the fact that the SNP has never supported any trade deal so I am slightly

doubtful that whatever reassurances I give her will make her change her mind. However, I say again that there will be no compromise on the UK's food safety, animal welfare and environmental standards in relation to this or any other free trade agreement. Hormone-injected beef will not be allowed into this country. It is not allowed into this country today; our standards will be unchanged and it will not be allowed in the future. Australia does sell us beef and lamb, however, and I expect that will continue under this agreement.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): As my right hon. Friend has said, global demand for lamb and beef is rising rapidly, particularly for British meats around the Asian-Pacific market. Does he therefore agree that the free trade agreements that he has already made and is currently pursuing are creating fantastic opportunities for British farmers, as confirmed by Minette Batters, president of the National Farmers Union, in her email to us earlier today?

Greg Hands: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is about opportunities; this is about opportunities for using UK free trade agreements to enter fast-growing markets around the world—the opportunity provided by the gateway of joining the CPTPP, a high-standards free trade agreement of 11 Pacific nations. However, we are not just waiting for free trade agreements; we are using talks on market access to make sure that our agricultural produce gets sold into the likes of China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and others using our joint economic and trade committee, and making sure that, wherever possible, we can meet the growing demand for high-quality meat products in particular in Asian markets. I said earlier that meat consumption is projected to rise by nearly 73% by 2050; the vast majority of that will be in those fast-growing Asian markets.

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

12.23 pm

Sitting suspended.

Business of the House

12.25 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): The business for the week commencing 7 June will include:

MONDAY 7 JUNE—Remaining stages of the Advanced Research and Invention Agency Bill.

TUESDAY 8 JUNE—Second Reading of the Compensation (London Capital & Finance Plc and Fraud Compensation Fund) Bill, followed by a motion relating to the appointment of external members to the House of Commons Commission, followed by a motion relating to the membership of the Parliamentary Works Estimates Commission, followed by a motion relating to the membership of the Speaker's Committee for the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority.

WEDNESDAY 9 JUNE—Opposition day (1st allotted day). There will be a debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition, subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 10 JUNE—General debate on support for the aviation, travel and tourism industries, followed by a general debate on world press freedom. The subjects for these debates were previously recommended by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 11 JUNE—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 14 June will include:

MONDAY 14 JUNE—Second Reading of the National Insurance Contributions Bill.

TUESDAY 15 JUNE—Second Reading of the Rating (Coronavirus) and Directors Disqualification (Dissolved Companies) Bill.

WEDNESDAY 16 JUNE—Opposition day (2nd allotted day). There will be a debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition, subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 17 JUNE—Business to be determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 18 JUNE—The House will not be sitting.

On Tuesday, the independent expert panel published its report on the conduct of the hon. Member for Delyn (Rob Roberts). I thank Sir Stephen Irwin and the panel for their work on this and other cases. The IEP has recommended the sanction of a six-week suspension, and a motion has been tabled so that the House can agree this after business questions today. The House will know that the sanctions determined by the independent expert panel fall outside the scope of the Recall of MPs Act 2015, which provides three conditions for a recall petition process, one of which is a suspension of a period of at least 10 sitting or 14 calendar days. For a recall to be initiated under the Act, the sanction must be applied on the recommendation of the Committee on Standards, or another Committee of the House of Commons concerned with standards of conduct. The independent expert panel is not a Committee of the House of Commons.

It may help if I remind the House of the background to the approach taken. The current arrangement was widely accepted at the time of the creation of the IEP. In particular, staff groups had made representations

that recall would be an inappropriate consequence in independent complaints and grievance scheme cases. It was felt that the opening of a recall petition could have implications for the reporter's confidentiality during the six weeks for which the recall petition is open and during any subsequent by-election campaign, should the 10% signing threshold be reached. In turn, it was felt that that could have an impact on the willingness of future complainants to come forward.

There was also concern about ensuring the independence of the process as far as possible, while recognising that it should, of course, be for the House to order suspension. However, that is not to say that there have not been concerns about the discrepancy between ICGS and non-ICGS cases when it comes to the interplay with the recall Act. I, too, have always been concerned by this matter. Following a case of this severity, in which it would be honourable for a Member to stand down after the withdrawal of the Whip, we need to look at whether the process is striking the right balance between independence, protecting the confidentiality of complainants and ensuring consistent outcomes across different types of conduct case. I can therefore confirm to the House that I have asked the chairman of the independent expert panel for his views on whether changes should be made to the current process to enable recall to be triggered. In my view, any changes in this regard should be made in the most straightforward way possible, and my preference would therefore be for a non-legislative solution.

This is ultimately a matter for the House, and the House of Commons Commission has always been involved in the establishment and running of the ICGS. I will look to work closely with you, Mr Speaker, and other members of the Commission, including of course the shadow Leader of the House—she has helpfully written to me this morning, and that is an important step forward in this process—on this and other matters.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank the Leader of the House for that statement and for his words just then, which I will return to shortly, but, first, may I wish you, Mr Speaker, all colleagues and staff a safe and productive recess?

If a Member is suspended from Parliament for 10 or more sitting days by the Standards Committee for a breach of the code of conduct, their constituents can remove that MP and cause a by-election under the Recall of MPs Act, but when the independent expert panel recommends suspension for sexual misconduct under the independent complaints and grievance scheme, they cannot. This is a loophole, and we can work together to fix it. I am encouraged by what the Leader of the House said and the tone in which he said it. I would like to work with him to go further and quicker, and I agree that there are non-legislative solutions.

In what other job could someone who has carried out sexual misconduct not face losing that job? As the House will know, the Member found to have carried out sexual misconduct by the panel this week lost his appeal and will shortly be the subject of the motion on the Order Paper, as the Leader of the House said. Knowing the Leader of the House as I do and from his words, I know we share common cause here. There are workable solutions to what will be a stain on us all if the public see someone who has carried out sexual misconduct keep their job in this place.

According to advice I have had this week from House staff, to whom I am truly grateful, this could be done in various ways, without legislation. Of course, as the Leader of the House said, ideally the Member would do the honourable thing and resign forthwith, but retrospective rule change is possible, permissible and could apply, because this is above party politics. It is about the Government doing the right thing, and it is about maintaining safe working for our staff, because Parliament should be a beacon of good practice. Process should not be a shield for unacceptable behaviour.

If the Member does not resign, he should be subject to recall and, if he is not, we run the risk of appearing as if this House does not take sexual misconduct seriously, which of course we do. As the Leader of the House said, I wrote to him this morning to offer to work with him to close the loophole urgently and seek solutions. I hope he will consider either meeting me today or speaking to me over recess so we can sort this out.

On doing the right thing, if the Prime Minister insists on having cosy chats with anti-democratic purveyors of hate, will he promise to challenge them on their antisemitism, their homophobia and their undermining of the rule of law, starting with Viktor Orbán this week?

By contrast, 51 years ago this week, a Labour Government passed the Equal Pay Act 1970, after women campaigned for equality. This pandemic has set working women back, so will the Government mark the anniversary by reinstating mandatory gender pay gap reporting, and will they publish the long-awaited review into rape prosecutions so survivors in Bristol West and beyond can have hope of justice?

This week, we have had more chaos as people in Bedford, Blackburn, Bolton, Burnley, Hounslow, Kirklees and North Tyneside found out that they had been subject to local lockdowns by stealth, without notice to them or their elected representatives. People trying to do the right thing cancelled events and family get-togethers they have waited so long for. The Government, having failed to act promptly on the surge of covid in India, which will have contributed to the increases in the variant, decided a buddy scheme would help people who were asked to isolate. Can the Leader of the House ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how she expects a buddy scheme to pay the rent or feed children? Can he ask her instead to bring in adequate payments for people asked to isolate? Will he also ask the Culture Secretary to sort out guidance for amateur choirs so that people in his constituency and mine can sing together again, as they already can in sports stadiums?

Finally, I ask the Leader of the House and all hon. Members to look at the National Portrait Gallery's online exhibition, "Hold Still". These photographs of people in the UK in 2020 tell a painful story of sacrifice, generosity, courage and the love that British people have given each other in this national crisis: children touching a care home window as grandparents touch the other side; a smartly dressed man all alone watching a funeral online; a mother kissing her baby for the first time through a plastic sheet; hands held tightly, tears shed, the anguish of people caring for covid patients who sadly died and of those who love them. They are people who love this country. They deserve the best from their Government: one who prioritise good jobs and a strong economy, fix social care and affordable housing, protect the NHS and education, and halt

climate change. I believe they are not getting that from this Government. They deserved a Government who took notice when the Opposition and the scientific experts argued for urgent action—not one who mocked and delayed, costing people dearly, but one who heeded all the recommendations of the pandemic preparedness exercise.

So that the Government can finally learn as quickly as possible the lessons of the past 14 months, and so that people can trust what they do next, will the Leader of the House now ask the Prime Minister to give us the date, scope and timetable of the public inquiry into his Government's handling of the covid crisis, with survivors and bereaved people at its heart? From the top down, the Government owe the British people that. Thank you, Mr Speaker, and stay safe over recess.

Mr Rees-Mogg: May I join the hon. Lady in wishing everybody an enjoyable and restful recess? It is a much calmer approach to Whitsun this year than it was last year. I thank everybody for all they have done in the period between Easter and now.

I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for her constructive comments in relation to recall. It is not so much a loophole as an active decision that was made in response to the views expressed by staff groups. They were concerned about issues relating to confidentiality if recall were allowed on ICGS cases. They were also worried about the requirement to involve a Committee in the House of Commons. In my opinion, those worries are not proportionate to the need to be clear that this House and all politicians think that sexual misconduct is at the most serious level of misbehaviour. It is frankly ridiculous that we have a higher sanction for somebody who uses a few envelopes incorrectly than for somebody who is involved in sexual misconduct, although I reiterate the point on my feelings about how an hon. Member would behave in these circumstances. But I am grateful for the hon. Lady's offer of support and I think, Mr Speaker, with the Commission, we can come up with a sensible solution.

On the visit by Viktor Orbán, Hungary is a very important ally of this country. It is crucial that we have sensible relationships with our allies, but that we are clear to our friends where we disagree with them. That is important not just with Hungary but with the whole range of countries we deal with. But Mr Orbán will be a very welcome visitor to this country.

The hon. Lady refers to the pay gap between men and women. Although it has been narrowing recently, the Government have been pushing forward with a considerable number of strategies to continue the equalities work that has been going on in this country for many decades, has seen considerable improvement and is a major part of the Government's levelling-up objective. We should level up across every part of this country and ensure we have economic prosperity.

The hon. Lady mentioned stealth lockdowns. I think "stealth lockdown" is an odd way—dare I say, an eccentric way—of looking at it. What is changing is that we are moving from a situation of absolute law, like the Ten Commandments—people know what they can do and what they cannot do—to saying that there are guidelines that wise people will follow. We are trusting the people as the lockdown comes to an end. That is the right way to be going: with both guidance and the clarity of law passed by this House.

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

The hon. Lady makes a fair point about amateur choirs. I remind the House that I am the patron of the Mendip male voice choir. That is something that I take great pride in and I am looking forward to hearing them back in full voice in due course, but that is currently under stage 4 of the lockdown process.

The hon. Lady challenges the record of this Government. I think it is a record of which we can be very proud. That is not to say that no mistakes were made at stages during the pandemic—a pandemic that nobody knew about and nobody predicted, which came upon us like a thief in the night—but none the less, enormous strides were made. The economic provision that was made means that our economy is bounding back as well as almost any economy in the world, with £407 billion of taxpayers' money ensuring that the structures of the economy were maintained, so that businesses, as demand comes back, have the supply to meet it in a non-inflationary way. There was the roll-out of the vaccine, a decision taken directly by the Prime Minister, with the vaccine tsar reporting directly to the Prime Minister. It is a terrific success and one this nation can be proud of. There is the ability we have had to ensure that the NHS was not overrun—that the NHS was able to cope—and the fantastic work that the NHS has done in supporting this country. There is our ability to send vaccines to some of the poorest countries in the world and to provide funding to help some of the poorest countries in the world. So not only have we done it for ourselves—not only have we got a record of which we can be proud in this country—but we are helping globally.

We should recognise that, but, of course, there is a continual learning process about what went right and what went wrong and to do more of what went right and less of what went wrong. That is what is happening and there will, of course, by the end of this Session of Parliament, be an inquiry established to look into it all.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): Two police stations in my constituency are under threat of closure—one from the lease expiring and the other is likely to be sold by the Mayor of London. Given this Government's enormous investment in the police, does my right hon. Friend agree that it is important to keep a physical police presence in north Kensington, and will he contemplate a debate on police stations generally in central London?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend raises an exceptionally important point. It is vital for MPs to campaign to ensure the safety of their constituents. We are recruiting as a Government—as a nation—20,000 additional police officers, and the latest published figures show that we have recruited 6,620 of them so far. It is worth remembering that the Mayor of London is the police and crime commissioner for London, so I welcome my hon. Friend scrutinising his distinctly poor record in office. The safety of Londoners should be his absolute priority, when it seems that he prefers to spend his time hiring press officers—marvellous though press officers are, I think police officers may be better at keeping the streets of London safe. I would recommend an Adjournment debate in the first instance, but she is right to hold the Mayor of London to account and to hold his feet to the fire.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): I welcome the statement from the Leader of the House in regard to the independent expert panel. It is critical that there is confidence that all the processes in place are robust and that there is an equality of outcome. Central to all that is the importance of confidentiality. That is such an important point in all such cases.

Earlier this week, the Government published a number of statutory instruments regarding the space industry. Obviously, we are very keen in Scotland to see space playing a key part in the economy moving forward. However, the industry has been waiting for many months now for the Government's space strategy. With the new regulations laid before Parliament this week, some clarity about the strategy would go a long way to helping to ensure that we knew where we were going. Can we have a debate in Government time to discuss the space strategy to see where and what that will actually look like?

A constituent got in touch with me regarding their elderly grandfather and his settled status documentation. He does not have biochipped documentation and having been in Scotland for a long time, this is now very unsettling to them. Could the Leader of the House help me to secure assurances from the Home Office that a lack of biochipping will not prevent my constituent's grandfather from receiving a settled status outcome?

Although I fear I might be taking a long shot here, I wonder whether the Leader of the House might join me in welcoming the findings of the Scottish Government's Social Justice and Fairness Commission—perhaps not, but I am sure that the proposals will be welcomed by all my constituents, who are keen to see a fairer and more socially just future for Scotland. Can we have a debate in Government time to consider how the UK Government might learn lessons from the Scottish Government's approach in this regard to help to deliver a fairer society?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comments on the independent expert panel and on confidentiality. It is very encouraging to see how much desire there is to work across the House to come to a sensible solution.

On the space industry, all the world's a stage, but beyond it there is an even bigger stage for the hon. Gentleman and others to investigate. I hear that there have been reports in the newspapers—I think it was in the *Telegraph*—that the Americans are getting frightfully excited about people coming from outer space and UFOs, and that even former President Obama is getting interested. I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman wants a debate on little green men or whatever else may come from outer space, but the Government are developing a strategy. It is an important part of the future that so much space investment is going on and that that will be a United Kingdom-wide activity.

With regard to the hon. Gentleman's constituent, the grandfather who requires settled status: yes, of course if the hon. Gentleman writes to me with the details I will take the matter up with the Home Secretary on his behalf. The system has provided 5.4 million people with settled status—it has worked well, but it is obviously important that it is fair to everybody.

The hon. Gentleman finished by asking whether I would join in the Scottish Government's social justice and fairness scheme; he thought that probably I would

not. What I thought we might have a debate on, perhaps—if he would like to ask me this—is not the policy of the Scottish Government, which they can debate in the Scottish Parliament, but the amazing contribution that the United Kingdom and the United Kingdom taxpayer have made to supporting all parts of the United Kingdom during the pandemic—the £14.5 billion of extra UK taxpayer spending that has gone to Scotland via the Barnett formula, the £1.2 billion for the self-employment scheme for 430,000 claimants, and the nearly 900,000 jobs that have been saved by the furlough scheme. I think we could debate that at considerable length. Should there ever be time for an Opposition day for the SNP, I hope that that is what it will bring forward.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): In the absence of the Whitsun Adjournment debate, I, too, wish everyone a very happy recess.

Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on forced adoptions? On Tuesday, on behalf of the Movement for an Adoption Apology, I handed in a letter to the Prime Minister's office simply asking for an acknowledgment of the wrongs that have been done, including to a constituent of mine, and an apology on behalf of the Government institutions involved in what went on.

Mr Rees-Mogg: This is a matter that the House has debated previously. The Government have expressed, and let me re-express, our deepest sympathy to all those affected by historical forced adoptions. Successive Governments have amended legislation to ensure that that practice cannot happen again. The Children Act 1989 and the Adoption and Children Act 2002 changed the law so that adoption has to be agreed to by a court. There is a requirement to be certain that any written consent is real. Adoption agencies, now mainly local authorities, are covered by statute and inspected by Ofsted, so the situation that prevailed cannot prevail again. That is quite right and proper, and the distress caused to families is a matter of the gravest concern.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab) [V]: May I inform the House that the Backbench Business Committee has been re-established? It met yesterday and is now open for business for this parliamentary Session. I welcome the announcement of Thursday 17 June as the first day of Backbench Business debates. We anticipate another round of estimates day debates before the summer recess; the Committee will invite applications for slots shortly after the Whitsun recess. If Members wish to submit debate applications for consideration by the Committee at its next meeting, a week on Tuesday, will they please ensure that they submit them no later than 2 pm on Friday 4 June?

I place on record my thanks to the Members who sat as members of the Committee during the last Session but are no longer members of it: the hon. Members for Leicester East (Claudia Webbe), for Great Grimsby (Lia Nici), for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken). I thank them for their service on behalf of Members of this House. I also welcome to the Committee my constituency neighbour and hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne), who joined the Committee this week.

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is so nice to have a satisfied customer.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con) [V]: Now that the UK has left the EU, we are free to change the VAT system and introduce a new sales tax regime, possibly localised, which will put downward pressure on taxation. May we have consideration of a debate on ending VAT and introducing a more flexible sales tax system?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I agree with my hon. Friend about the importance of our new-found freedoms from the EU to set taxes how we please. We are no longer bound in to a complex agreement with the European Union and can therefore have our own competitive tax system. I am certainly intrigued by his idea that we should have local competition in tax systems, which they have in the United States, where some States have high sales taxes and others have lower sales taxes, and so on. It may be more difficult in a relatively small island, but it is worth noting that VAT is a broad-based tax on consumption designed to ensure the fair treatment of both consumers and businesses, and has been adopted not just in the European Union but by, I think, 170 countries. It may be that going away from VAT would not just be a statement of our Brexit independence, but go against a system that actually works quite well globally.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): The final criminal trials relating to the 1989 Hillsborough disaster collapsed yesterday, 32 years after 96 wholly innocent children, women and men were unlawfully killed by the negligence of others, primarily the South Yorkshire police, who should have been protecting them. No one responsible has been held accountable by our criminal justice system for those deadly failures. This catastrophic failure of justice seriously compounded the grief, pain and anger of the families, who yet again yesterday had to endure hearing on national media outlets the very slurs that the police statements at the heart of this prosecution were being changed to promote, namely that the Liverpool fans attending the match caused the disaster, something that has been utterly and comprehensively disproved by the 2016 inquest verdict.

Does the Leader of the House accept that the law now needs to be changed to prevent this utter failure over three decades from ever happening again to any families bereaved by public disasters? There will be more families bereaved by public disasters. Will he arrange a statement from the Lord Chancellor and a debate in this House, so that those of us who have proposals to stop this kind of thing ever happening again, for example in the public advocate Bill and the public authority accountability Bill, can again bring them to the House?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady is so right to raise this matter. It is the greatest scandal of British policing in our lifetimes, and the pain is still with those families. The thought of the number of children who were killed is something that makes the whole House grieve. When nobody is held to account for that, it surely indicates that something has gone wrong in our criminal justice system. The hon. Lady is therefore right to say that we must do things that make sure this never happens in future, because though there may be nothing further that can be done in the criminal justice system now, we cannot allow this ever to happen again and have no accountability not just for the terrible events that happened but for the wickedness of the cover-up. The hon. Lady is so right to highlight the cruelty of blaming the families for the misery that was inflicted upon them.

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

I will of course take forward any ideas the hon. Lady has to the Lord Chancellor. I will seek to get replies to any questions she may have. I cannot, as she knows, immediately promise Government time, but she knows there are other ways of getting debates going in this House. It is worth remembering the early success of the Backbench Business Committee in having a debate on Hillsborough in about 2010, which helped to at least get some answers, if not necessarily the full legal conclusion that many would have liked and felt would have been just.

Mark Jenkinson (Workington) (Con): The Duffield beacon in Workington was erected and first lit to mark the Beacon Europe celebrations in 1992. Built by British Steel apprentices from Workington Rail, it stands today as a monument to our steel industry. Independent councillors who now run the town council have launched a sham consultation on fictitious health and safety grounds, offering Workington constituents a Hobson's choice: whether the beacon should remain and never again be lit, or be chopped in half. May we have a debate in Government time on the protection of important local monuments such as the Duffield beacon?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I can assure my hon. Friend that the Government are committed to ensuring that this country's heritage is appropriately protected. That is why planning rules have been amended to ensure that the removal of unlisted historic monuments requires an application for planning permission. Local planning authorities are responsible for determining such applications, and local people will be able to make their views known through the application process. However, there is nothing worse than pettifogging bureaucracy trying to stop a local monument being lit, used, admired and enjoyed, and he is absolutely right to bash his local council for its silly behaviour.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): May I place on the record my thanks to the Leader of the House for the integrity that he has shown this afternoon in setting out his view that if a Member is found to have committed sexual misconduct, it is a curse on all our houses and it is the right and honourable thing for that Member to resign? I pay tribute to him for that. I know that he cares deeply about this House, the Members in it and the purpose for which we are all elected to serve our constituents.

Will the Leader of the House provide a statement from Housing, Communities and Local Government Ministers to update us on what is happening with the Government's much-celebrated levelling-up fund? There was what can only be described as an embarrassing session of the Welsh Affairs Committee today, where Ministers seemed unable to clarify how the additional streams of funding will work into years 2, 3 and 4; whether funding will be available in the long term beyond the first year; whether Members of Parliament can support one substantive bid, one transport bid and three additional bids, and what happens if a bid fails. There just seems to be continuous confusion, so I would be grateful if he could provide some clarity from Ministers.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am always happy to take on individual questions and pass them through to Ministers, but the levelling up of the country is a major ambition of this

Government. Forty-five new town deals worth £1 billion are already there, the UK community renewal fund has been launched, and the first round of the £4.8 billion levelling-up fund has been announced. I seem to remember from last week that the deadline for applications is Waterloo Day. At least we know when the deadline for applications is, and I suggest that MPs should support lots of applications for their local area. Always support your local area in trying to get money out of central Government; that seems wise advice to Members of Parliament.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con) [V]: May we have a statement on whether churches and other places of worship will be able to operate without any mandatory restrictions from 21 June, or when England moves to step 4 of the Government's road map? In the meantime, can choirs—I have many wonderful choirs in my constituency—be brought into line with the current guidance for other non-professional music activity indoors, as was the case between August and December last year?

Mr Rees-Mogg: On choirs, the issue is essentially the budget of risk. When people sing—particularly if they sing loudly—there is a greater risk because more droplets are spewed out into the atmosphere. The restriction on choirs is well thought through and proportionate, but the hope, obviously, is that on 21 June, when we get to step 4, choirs will be able to come back and church services will return to normal. Step 3 has seen some improvements in church services getting back to normal, although it has to be said that some of the things that were banned and considered dangerous were some modern excretions into church services that I was not too sorry we did not have for a bit.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I am intrigued that the question I asked the Leader of the House last week has widespread support. I hope that he got his birthday song sung to him, and I wish him happy birthday again in retrospect.

In my constituency, GPs' practices are under severe pressure. I pay tribute to them for their dedication and commitment during the past 14 months. As we come out of lockdown, GPs are facing a tsunami of cases because so much of routine practice had to be put on hold. The extra pressure will hit a workforce that is already on its knees, so may we have a statement from the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care—I realise that he is rather busy at the moment—on what the Government plan to do to support GP practices with extra resources, including for mental health support?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The Government are seriously tackling mental health issues and considerable additional funding is being provided for mental healthcare, which is at the heart of the NHS long-term plan. There will be £2.3 billion extra by 2023-24 to support 380,000 more adults and 345,000 more children. As regards GP practices, things are beginning to get back to normal and people are entitled to face-to-face consultations if they need them. Over the past year there were 56,900 more people working in the NHS, and the Government are recruiting 6,000 more doctors in general practice during the course of this Parliament. Steps are being taken very much in line with what the hon. Lady asks for. She pays tribute to her local GP practices and her local NHS; as we

share an NHS area, may I join her in that? We are extraordinarily lucky to have such dedicated and hard-working people. This is an opportunity to thank Ian Orpen, who was the chairman of the clinical commissioning group for the area and did such a sterling job for a long time before retiring recently.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): Two weeks ago, nine-year-old Jordan Banks was tragically struck by lightning and died in my constituency while playing a game of football. I am sure that my right hon. Friend will join me in passing on heartfelt condolences to his family and friends and thanking those in Blackpool who are now organising events to celebrate his life. Football has a unique ability to bring communities together and this tragic event, as well as Blackpool playing in the football play-off final on Sunday at Wembley, has brought the whole town together. Will my right hon. Friend look to hold a debate in Government time to celebrate the positive impact that community football clubs such as Jordan's team, Clifton Rangers, can have in our communities?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I join my hon. Friend in sending condolences to the family and friends of Jordan Banks and praying for the repose of his soul. I know that clubs have played a crucial role in bringing communities together in the pandemic and, of course, bringing communities together when there is sadness. It is such a wonderful thing that football clubs are paying tribute to Jordan. It builds a whole community: young and old come together behind the team they all support and admire, whether it is successful or not. I wish both Blackpool and Lincoln luck in their match on Saturday.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab) [V]: I concur with the call from my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) for a Hillsborough-type law.

Last week, the roof and part of the building of Northwich station in my constituency collapsed. It was a miracle that nobody was killed or seriously injured. I, and other disability campaigners and councillors, have been calling for a considerable number of years for investment in and modernisation of that facility, plus those across the north. Will the Leader of the House find time to debate real investment in the rail infrastructure in the north of England?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The level of investment in the railways is unprecedented since Victorian times—which you may think suits me, Madam Deputy Speaker, because I have always had rather an affection for Victorian times. As regards the roof at Northwich station, I will pass that issue on to the Secretary of State for Transport on the hon. Gentleman's behalf.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con) [V]: The recent monsoon-like conditions have created flooding in my suburban constituency, particularly in Kenton and parts of Edgware, caused by the flooding of the Kenton brook. Unfortunately, Harrow Council, which is responsible for some of the maintenance of the sewers and the overflow, blames the Environment Agency. We have tried to get the Environment Agency to take prompt action. Because of over-development and front gardens being lost so that people can put in driveways, the

normal soakaways are not available. May we have a debate in Government time on flooding in urban and suburban areas, so that we can call on the Environment Agency and other partners to ensure that they carry out their duties in a proper way?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend raises an issue that is a matter of concern across the country, and flooding does have a terrible impact on people's homes and on families. The Government announced a record £5.2 billion of taxpayers' money to be spent on flood and coastal defences, which is double the previous spending, to protect 336,000 properties. The Environment Agency's flood and coastal risk management strategy will prepare us for more extreme weather and build a better prepared and more resilient nation—it is building back better against floods. The responsibility for drainage is really with local authorities, which are meant to clean their drains and deal with surface water, so he is right to highlight the failures of his local council. As regards a debate, I believe he has a certain influence with the Backbench Business Committee, so he may wish to use that to get the debate he seeks.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP) [V]: My constituent Anna Slwinska was enrolled in her company pension scheme with Halliburton. When she was made redundant, she was given six months to transfer her pension pot. She initiated the process within the timescale, but Capita, the administrator, says that it did not receive the second of two forms and has kept all her money. The pensions ombudsman says that there is nothing it can do. So may we have a debate in Government time about the fact that sharp practice in the pensions industry may discourage people such as my constituent Anna from saving for their retirement?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to the hon. and learned Lady for raising this case in relation to Halliburton, Capita and her constituent Anna. Our job as MPs is to seek redress of grievance individually for our constituents. If there is anything I can do to help achieve that redress of grievance for Anna, I will do it, because sharp practice should not lead to people losing their pension and therefore people being discouraged from preparing for their old age.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): First, on behalf of my constituents in Hyndburn and Haslingden, I would like to send my sincere condolences to the family and friends of Dr Ron Hill MBE after his sad passing. He was not only a former Olympic marathon runner, but a true local hero.

One of the biggest concerns that my constituents raise with me is speeding, particularly on roads such as Hud Hey Road, Blackburn Road, Manchester Road and Stanhill Lane. Will the Leader of the House allow a debate in Government time so that we are able to discuss what further measures can be taken to stop careless drivers putting at risk the lives of local residents, such as mine in Hyndburn and Haslingden?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I join my hon. Friend in sending condolences to Mr Hill's family. I know that he was a very important, well-known local figure. Not only should drivers obey the speed limit, but my hon. Friend was right to highlight careless driving. It is not always speed,

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

but sometimes the carelessness and lack of consideration for the area that they are driving through that leads to the greatest number of accidents. The enforcement, advertising and decision making on speed limits is a local matter, so in her constituency it is a matter for Lancashire County Council, and the local police force has the responsibility for enforcement. However, it is worth pointing out that the Department for Transport launched a call for evidence last autumn as part of a wider roads policing review—an examination of roads policing in England and Wales and its relevance to road safety. The Government will publish their responses in the summer and I hope they will be reassuring to my hon. Friend.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP) [V]: I am sure that the Leader of the House agrees that Lord Hall has very serious questions to answer regarding the re-employment of Mr Martin Bashir at the BBC. Will the Leader of the House let me know whether there is any mechanism that can be deployed, or that has indeed been examined, that would allow for the removal of Lord Hall's title and privileges here in the other House, because of the alleged serious breaches that he has been engaged in? Is that being examined and is there a process, given the serious nature of his misdemeanour?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Madam Deputy Speaker, I notice a slightly raised eyebrow or slightly furrowed brow, because by convention we would not talk about individual peers in a disobliging way. There is an ancient practice for removing peerages, which is by Bill of attainder, but looking at the Clerk at the Table, I do not think that it has been used in at least the last 200 years, and probably not beyond the early part of the 18th century, so it may be that a Bill of attainder is an unlikely procedure.

There is a procedure for removing the peerages of Lords who go to prison for a certain period, which came in relatively recently. The House of Lords has exclusive cognisance of its own affairs and can, of course, suspend peers in certain circumstances. It was on the cusp of suspending all sorts of peers for not attending the valuing everybody training, but it seemed to step away from that, in the end, when a particularly distinguished noble baroness was one of the people who had not done that training.

There are mechanisms, but they are at the highest end of our constitutional activity for the most serious misdemeanours, and whether it would be right to go into them in a specific circumstance is a matter I cannot go into at the Dispatch Box.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con) [V]: In the last week, two of my constituents—both British citizens—have received letters from the Home Office telling them they will lose their pension unless they apply for EU settled status. Please will my right hon. Friend do his best to extract a statement from the Home Office as to what data sharing is going on across Government that has led to those errors, which have alarmed pensioners in my constituency and, I assume, elsewhere?

Mr Rees-Mogg: May I begin by congratulating my right hon. Friend? I remember her being questioned by the Brexit Committee, when I was on it, about the

settled status scheme, which has been an absolute triumph. It started with the work of my right hon. Friend, and 5.4 million people have now settled and secured settled status. She has done a service to 5.4 million people, which is an amazing achievement. It has given certainty to all those people.

Mistakes happen. When they happen, they must be put right. The examples that my right hon. Friend mentions sound particularly ridiculous—a British citizen should not have to apply for settled status—and I cannot understand why that would have happened or how that information has been shared, but I will certainly take up those specific cases with the Home Office.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): The scandal of fire and rehire continues, and there seems to be no movement at all from the Government to address it. It is three months since the Government received the ACAS report. If we cannot have legislation to ban this outrageous practice, can we have a Government statement responding to the ACAS report, so we understand where the Government are on this scandal?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am very sympathetic to the issue the hon. Gentleman has raised. We have discussed it in the House before, and there is a considerable degree of agreement that fire and rehire is a disreputable negotiating tactic and gives capitalism, of which I am a great supporter, a bad name. The Department is considering the ACAS report, and I am afraid that my line is the same as before: information will be brought forward soon. Unfortunately, “soon” is rather an elastic concept in the bureaucratic world.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con) [V]: Will my right hon. Friend make parliamentary time available for a debate on markets and how, post-pandemic, they can play a crucial role in the regeneration of town centres throughout the country? Will he join me in welcoming my local council's levelling-up fund bid to ensure that the world-famous Bury market not only continues to play a crucial role in the economic and social life of my town, but develops as a multipurpose community hub?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am very sympathetic to what my hon. Friend has said: local town markets draw people in, and they are a highlight that people go into town to use. They often offer all sorts of attractive things for people to buy, and as we normalise after the pandemic, I think they will be a great attraction. Bury market, as my hon. Friend says, is historic, and I wish him every success with the levelling-up fund bid. I cannot necessarily add my imprimatur to it because I would then be asked endlessly for my support for bids across the country, which might exceed the amount of money available.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Those who have been bereaved or left with long-term illnesses during the pandemic cannot fail to be alarmed by yesterday's evidence from the Prime Minister's former close adviser. These matters are now in the public domain: allegations that Government adopted a policy of herd immunity, and that they ignored the scientific facts and delayed lockdowns, leading to tens of thousands of avoidable deaths. The truth needs to be examined in the future—I accept that—but surely people deserve some answers now. If we are not to get an immediate public inquiry,

the Prime Minister should make a statement about the decision not to hold an inquiry sooner, so that at least we can represent our constituents and ask him questions based on the evidence to the Select Committees yesterday.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The Prime Minister was asked about the inquiry yesterday. An inquiry will be set up in this Session, and it is right to do that at the point at which events are more under control. It would not be right to do it while the pandemic is still raging. Evidence was given yesterday by somebody who played a very important role within the Government and who was a very active part of the decision-making process, and who now seems to have turned himself into Achithophel. The lines that come to mind are:

“In Friendship False, Implacable in Hate:
Resolv'd to Ruine or to Rule the State.”

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I need to finish this session by about 25 past at the latest, because we have two very well-subscribed debates to follow. If I am to get everybody in, I must ask the remaining speakers to ask short questions, and I am sure that the Leader of the House will respond with shorter answers.

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): Last week was, of course, Dementia Action Week, and when I met with the Alzheimer's Society, it presented several worrying statistics, one of which showed the rise in the use of anti-psychotic drugs. Based on the stats in Oxfordshire, fewer than one in five of the people who had been prescribed anti-psychotic drugs actually had a diagnosis of psychosis. Will the Leader of the House please get a statement from the Department for Health and Social Care about what lies behind that rise in the use of anti-psychotic drugs in people who do not actually have psychosis?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that deeply concerning issue. NHS England and NHS Improvement continue to monitor the monthly data published by NHS Digital on the prescribing of anti-psychotic medication for people diagnosed with dementia. However, the issue he raises needs a fuller answer, and I will take it up with the Department on his behalf.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Will the Leader of the House arrange for a debate and votes in this House before the hybrid proceedings lapse on 21 June? We cannot just have some return to the status quo ante as if the past year and a bit has not happened. He was once a champion of Back Benchers and the right of this House to decide its procedures for itself, so will he ensure that debate happens in good time so that we can plan the way forward for the House and the estate more generally?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The emergency provisions were brought in on the basis that the status quo ante would be restored, and then the House could decide in an orderly and proper way what, if anything, it wished to keep. It would be cheating Members who supported the temporary measures if they were to be made permanent before they had lapsed and we had gone back to normal.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): A few weeks ago, I received a letter from Sammy Steven, who is a customer at the Papworth Trust on Foundation Street in Ipswich. It does

fantastic work supporting the disabled community and adults with learning disabilities in Ipswich. When the lockdown started, they were very down and did not know how they were going to cope, but the exceptional work done by the staff and volunteers made it work. They became journalists and created a “Lockdown Journal” to write about their experiences, so that they will remember them for ever more. They also tried out new things, becoming poets and music instructors. Will my right hon. Friend find time for us to debate how we fund and structure services to support adults with learning disabilities, so that we think positively about what they can do and not always about what they cannot?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend puts it absolutely correctly. We should always think about what people can do. We should always be positive as a society. I am so glad to hear about the work of the Papworth Trust. Organisations like that are a lifeline of support for some of the most vulnerable in our communities, and everything that can be done to support them should be done.

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that if essential local services such as a post office need to close temporarily, there should be measures such as transport links, like a minibus, to nearby post offices or a temporary solution based nearby so that elderly residents are not cut off from this important service? May I request that we have a debate on this subject?

Mr Rees-Mogg: If this is a specific case, I think an Adjournment debate is the most suitable approach. The Government are strongly supportive of ensuring that everyone in the country, especially the vulnerable, has access to essential services via the post office within their local community. As 99% of the population are within three miles of their nearest post office and 90% are within one mile, I do understand that if one is shut for a temporary period, that can be difficult for some local residents.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The headline-hogging antics of Dominic Cummings have meant that the Tory Islamophobia inquiry's conclusion that this was fuelled by PM's comments about Muslim women as letterboxes and bank robbers and the 2016 smearing of Sadiq Khan has gone unnoticed here. When public buildings all over the UK were illuminated this week in solidarity one year on from the racist murder of George Floyd, there was not a peep here. Can the Conservatives demonstrate how serious they are about these issues and give Government time and legislation so that levelling up applies everywhere, and to ethnicity, not just to electorally expedient geography?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The Conservative party commissioned the report, has accepted the results of the report, and has accepted all the recommendations, which will be implemented in full. It has recognised, as the report did, that there may be some individuals who have views that are improper and wrong, and are not suitable to be Conservatives if they hold such views, and it has dealt with people and disciplined people who have fallen into that category. I think it is an issue that the Conservative party has shown it takes enormously seriously and has dealt with. I would say to the socialists on the Labour Benches: motes and beams, motes and beams.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): The last bank in Knaresborough closed earlier this year, and I have been concerned at the lack of access to cash and financial services in the town, and particularly the impact on business. Conservative councillors Ed Darling and Samantha Mearns are working to bring extra cash machines to the town to replace the ones lost, and the borough council is working with Barclays to bring its mobile services to the town over the months ahead. However, there will clearly be an impact on the local community, and it will not be the only local community facing this challenge. May we have a debate on the impact of the loss of banks and associated financial services within communities to look at the ideas that are available to help people when this happens?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The Government recognise the importance of cash to the daily lives of millions of people across the UK, particularly those in vulnerable groups, and are committed to protecting access to cash for those who need it. Inevitably, decisions on opening and closing bank branches are commercial decisions, but the Government believe that the impact of branch closures should be understood and mitigated where possible. The major high street banks have signed up to the access to banking standard, which commits them to ensure that customers are well informed about branch closures and options for continued access to banking services such as the post office, as 95% of business customers and 99% of personal banking customers can carry out their everyday banking at 11,500 post office branches in the UK. Steps are taken, but I know that the matter concerns many Members across the House and it may well be suitable for a longer Back-Bench business debate.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): The Welsh language has been spoken on these islands, indeed on this island, since long before the English language arrived on our shores. In fact, the Welsh epic poem “Y Gododdin” describes a battle in the 6th century between Anglo-Saxon invaders and Welsh-speaking warriors from the south of Scotland. The battle took place in modern-day Yorkshire. Does the Leader of the House agree that we should have an early statement from the Culture Secretary to give clarity on the improved funding needed for the Welsh language broadcaster S4C so that it can help to ensure that Welsh, spoken daily by half a million people in the UK, continues to survive and thrive in the digital age?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Welsh is unquestionably a beautiful language of great antiquity in this country. My mother’s father was a Welsh speaker, so this is not the Rees bit of me but the Morris bit of me that very much values Welsh heritage and culture and, of course, its continued use as a daily language. It may be better for the Welsh Government to take up these matters, because it is for them to promote the Welsh language, though I am aware that S4C is in a slightly different category.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Con): I recently met Katie from my constituency to discuss endometriosis. I am sure that my right hon. Friend will recall that we recently recognised Endometriosis Month, yet women still have to wait, on average, eight years for diagnosis, and that has been made worse by increasing backlogs due to covid. Can he allow time for a debate on what can be done to benefit all those unfortunate enough to suffer from endometriosis and to help to ensure that gynaecology theatre times are not the last element to be considered with regard to women’s health and the reopening of the health service?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Endometriosis can be a very debilitating condition that affects around one in 10 women of reproductive age, and it is therefore important that the appropriate care is available to those who need it. I note my hon. Friend’s point that it takes, on average, eight years for a diagnosis. On 8 March, the Department of Health and Social Care launched a call for evidence to inform the development of the first women’s health strategy for England. Consultation closes on 13 June. Within that call for evidence, both the online survey and written submissions seek information on gynaecological conditions, including endometriosis. I encourage women with experience of this issue, and MPs on behalf of their constituents when it has come to their attention, to respond to the call for evidence so that we can identify areas for further work. It has previously been raised on the Floor of the House, and the Government are aware that it is a very serious issue for many women.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Leader of the House for his statement. I shall now suspend the House for two minutes to make arrangements for the next business.

1.26 pm

Sitting suspended.

Business without Debate

INDEPENDENT EXPERT PANEL

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 150(2)(d)),

That this House:-

(1) takes note of the report of the Independent Expert Panel, The Conduct of Mr Rob Roberts MP, HC 245 and the recommendation, upheld on appeal, for sanction of a suspension of six weeks; and

(2) accordingly suspends Rob Roberts from the service of the House for a period of six weeks.—(*Mr Rees-Mogg, on behalf of the House of Commons Commission.*)

Question agreed to.

Dementia Action Week

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):

Before I call the Minister, let me say that this is a heavily subscribed debate, as is the next one. We intend to divide the time equally between the two debates, which means that this debate will need to finish by 3.15 at the latest—perhaps a little before. There is a three-minute time limit on Back-Bench speeches. I know that those on the Front Bench have agreed to be as succinct as they can be. It may not be possible to get everybody in, but we will do our best.

1.29 pm

The Minister for Care (Helen Whately): I beg to move, That this House has considered Dementia Action Week.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) on securing this debate to mark Dementia Action Week. I pay particular tribute to her work as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on dementia, and to the charities that she and I both work with, including the Alzheimer's Society.

I know how hard the last 12 months have been for those living with dementia and their families. Living with dementia is hard in normal times, but harder still during a pandemic. It has been an incredibly difficult year. I know that, and I have seen that. There are more than 850,000 people living with dementia and around 670,000 carers looking after them. I thank everyone who is caring for someone with dementia.

While many thousands of people have dementia, we must not, and I do not, see it as an inevitable part of ageing. Although one in six of those over 80 have dementia, five in six do not. Around a third of dementia cases are estimated to be preventable. I am ambitious—ambitious about preventing dementia, ambitious about developing treatments, and ambitious about one day developing a cure. However, first I will update the House on what we have been doing under the umbrella of the challenge on dementia 2020 and in response to the pandemic.

Last year, we assessed delivery of the 2020 challenge, which showed that we now have more than 3 million dementia friends, thanks to the Alzheimer's Society. We have 437 areas across England and Wales signed up as dementia-friendly communities. We have 137 trusts signed up to the dementia-friendly hospital charter and, thanks to Skills for Care and Health Education England, more than a million care workers and another million NHS workers have received dementia awareness training. Added to that, our commitment to spend £300 million on dementia research over five years was delivered a year early, with £344 million spent over four years.

Timely diagnosis of dementia is really important to help people to understand what is going on, find out what support is available and get advice on what happens next. Since 2016, we have consistently met the challenge on dementia target of two thirds of people living with dementia receiving a formal diagnosis. However, at the start of the pandemic many memory assessment services had to close, and the dementia diagnosis rate has dropped below the national ambition for the first time since 2016.

While we have supported remote or virtual memory assessment services, I recognise that that is not for everyone. I want to see in-person services fully functional

as soon as possible, because a diagnosis can make such a difference, allowing people to access the support that they need.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The charity Music for Dementia says that those who have started to sing or listen to music on a daily basis have

“more than doubled their quality of life...whilst halving their depressive symptoms.”

Could that charity be introduced to the Government's strategy?

Helen Whately: The hon. Member makes a really important point: music is one of the things that is known to really help people who are living with dementia. It helps to improve the quality of their lives, and it has been one of things that has been hard to access during the pandemic. I am determined that we see that kind of support restarted, and develop further support along those lines in the months and years ahead.

We have allocated £17 million of funding to NHS England to get the diagnosis rate that I was talking about back up to where it should be, to support the needs of those waiting for a diagnosis and to help those who have been unable to access support due to the pandemic. Everyone with dementia should receive meaningful personalised care, from diagnosis to end of life, to help them to live with the condition and to live the fullest possible life for as long as possible.

It is imperative that we support those—often husbands, wives, partners, sons and daughters—who care for loved ones with dementia. They take on a huge burden of care, both practically and emotionally. Since the Care Act 2014, every carer for someone with dementia should have their needs assessed by their local authority and should then receive the support that they need, whether that is support with caring or respite, time out for themselves or sometimes help with extra costs. That is crucial, not only because carers are so important to the person with dementia they care for, but because they need to have a life alongside caring.

Throughout the past year, we have worked with the Alzheimer's Society, Age UK, Carers UK, other charities, care providers, local authorities and the NHS to work out how best to support people with dementia and their carers during the pandemic and put that support in place. We have provided more than £500,000 in funding to the Alzheimer's Society for its Dementia Connect programme, £500,000 to the Carers Trust for its support to unpaid carers, £122,000 to Carers UK to extend its helpline opening hours and £480,000 to the Race Equality Foundation.

We have provided free personal protective equipment for carers where they live separately from the people they care for, in line with clinical advice. We have given carers priority to vaccines in line with Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation prioritisation, considered them time and again in guidance, worked to better identify them and supported local authorities in the restoration of day and respite services, including with nearly £12 million in funding from the infection control fund.

As we come out of the pandemic, we want not only to ensure that we restore and improve early diagnosis and support for people living with dementia and their carers,

[Helen Whately]

but to go further: to prevent people from getting dementia in the first place, support research to develop effective treatments and, ultimately, find a cure. The National Institute for Health Research is right now supporting several studies on dementia.

The 2019 Conservative party manifesto committed to doubling funding for dementia research and delivering a moonshot of ambitious goals. The moonshot will expand the UK's internationally leading research effort to understand the mechanisms underlying the development and progression of dementia, develop new therapies and help to prevent the condition. We are working right now on developing a new dementia strategy to boost dementia awareness, diagnosis, care, support and research in England. As everyone knows, we are committed to wider reform of social care; we will bring forward proposals for that later this year.

We want a society where the public think and feel differently about dementia—where there is less fear, stigma and discrimination, and more understanding. We want to reduce the number of preventable cases of dementia. We are determined to support those who are living with dementia to live the fullest possible life for as long as possible, and to support those who care for them. We will lead the way in dementia research and innovation to find effective treatments and, ultimately, a cure.

1.37 pm

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): Dementia affects the lives of hundreds of thousands of people in this country: not only the 850,000 people who currently have the condition, but thousands more of their family and friends, as I am sure many of us in this House know. It is the leading cause of death in England, and the only condition in the top 10 causes of death for which there is currently no known treatment or cure. Our ageing population means that the number of people with dementia is set to increase to 2 million by 2050, with the cost of caring for dementia more than doubling to almost £60 billion a year.

Over the past 15 months, people with dementia and their families have suffered perhaps more than anyone else because of covid-19. A quarter of all deaths from this awful virus have been among those with dementia, predominantly because of the tragedy in our care homes. Tens of thousands more have seen their condition deteriorate, and families have been pushed to breaking point and banned for more than a year from seeing their loved ones in care homes. Those who look after a relative in their own home have been providing even more care than usual.

Dealing with this pandemic was always going to be extremely difficult, but the truth is that there has been a higher proportion of deaths in care homes in England than in almost any other country in the developed world. Between 17 March and 15 April last year, 25,000 people were discharged from hospital to care homes without a covid-19 test, despite clear evidence of the virus sweeping through care homes in Italy, America and France.

Care providers and trade unions warned the Government about the lack of testing and PPE. The Prime Minister was personally warned about those issues by my hon.

Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) in Prime Minister's questions on 25 March. I myself wrote to the Health Secretary about these issues on 8 April.

Despite all that, the official guidance on testing before discharge to care homes did not change until 16 April last year, almost a month after we all went into national lockdown. We do not need Mr Cummings to tell us that the rhetoric about putting a protective shield around care homes was complete nonsense; the evidence is there for all to see. The reason this matters—the reason the truth and the facts matter—is that we owe it to people who have lost their loved ones with dementia, to those who are still being prevented from having normal visits to care homes and to all the staff in care homes who have been to hell and back. We have to learn the lessons from what has happened to make sure these terrible mistakes never happen again.

If we want to build a better country as we emerge from covid-19 and meet the challenges of this century of ageing, then the needs of people with dementia must move to the top of the agenda. That starts with dementia research, because ultimately our goal must be to prevent, treat and ultimately cure this often heartbreaking condition. The rapid development of treatments and vaccines for covid-19 has shown us the amazing things our scientists can achieve when they are backed by political will and underpinned with the right resources and partnerships. Ministers now need to apply the same approach to dementia research.

In their 2019 manifesto, the Government promised to double funding for dementia research and speed up progress in clinical trials. When will they deliver on that commitment? Over the past decade, huge progress has been made in imaging, artificial intelligence, genetics and drug development, and that has brought us to a tipping point in dementia research, which the UK is extremely well placed to capitalise on because of our diverse academic research base, funded by the public, private and charitable sectors, and because of the strong foundations in clinical research provided by the NHS. Ministers need to seize this opportunity to give dementia research a greater priority and turn the UK into a world leader in clinical trials, so that patients here can be among the first to benefit from improved treatments.

The second issue Ministers need to grasp is transforming support for families. That should happen across the entire health and care system, but perhaps nowhere more so than in dementia care. Dementia gradually erodes your ability to think, communicate and even move. It destroys your memory, gradually taking away what makes you, you. That is what makes it so very painful for the people who live with dementia and the people who love them.

When someone has dementia or Alzheimer's, their family is their memory. No matter how amazing NHS or care workers are, they cannot know the foods the person likes, the films they used to watch or the songs they like to sing. That is one of the reasons why so many people in care homes have gone downhill so fast without regular family visits. The bottom line is that we cannot provide good-quality dementia care without putting families centre stage.

Our health and care services need to do far more to identify people who help care for someone with dementia, get them better information and advice and make sure that services are far more joined up, so that people do

not have to tell their story to lots of different people in lots of different parts of the system. The Government need to properly fund breaks for family carers, so that they can put their own needs first, at least for a while, and fund other initiatives, such as the amazing support group for carers run by the Alzheimer's Society in Sefton, who I met recently. They are just absolutely phenomenal and a lovely bunch of people. I believe that Ministers need to change the law to enshrine the rights of care home residents to have family visits, so that the terrible situation facing hundreds of thousands of families over the past 15 months never happens again.

The final point I want to make is on the urgent need for the Government to make good on their promises to reform social care, because while dementia is not yet curable, our broken care system definitely is. For all that the Minister has said, the truth is that when the virus struck, our care system was far weaker than it ever should have been after a decade of cuts, taking £8 billion out of the care system at a time of growing demand. Two years ago, the Prime Minister stood on the steps of Downing Street and promised to fix the crisis in social care

“with a plan we have prepared”,

yet still these reforms are nowhere to be seen. If there is one thing, just one thing, that comes out of this awful pandemic, it must be a long-term plan that gives social care the priority it needs and deserves, and secures a sustainable funding base for the future.

Labour is calling for a 10-year plan of investment and reform to transform support for older and disabled people, including those with dementia, as part of a much wider ambition to make Britain the best country in which to grow old. In the century of ageing, we understand that social care is as much a part of our infrastructure as the roads and railways. If we neglect our country's physical infrastructure, we get roads full of potholes and buckling bridges, which prevent our economy from functioning properly. The same is true if we fail to invest in our social infrastructure. Without a properly paid and trained care workforce, vacancy and turnover rates soar, fewer people get the support they need and families end up taking the strain.

President Biden gets that, which is why he has made home care a central plank of his post-pandemic infrastructure plan. Britain deserves that level of ambition too. In the century of ageing, everyone should look forward to getting older with confidence, not fear. Labour Members stand ready to play our part in making that happen, but it is time for the Government to act.

1.46 pm

Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con): It is a real privilege to be able to contribute to this debate on Dementia Action Week. Dementia is an issue that affects many in my constituency.

Like many across this country, my family was affected by dementia: my grandma had vascular dementia. I come from a close family. When I speak to constituents, I recall my family's experience and what we learned from it. Of course, families' absolute priority is always to ensure the very best for the person they love. I have spoken to many constituents over the past year, and heard at first hand how much harder that experience has been made by covid. It was right that we prioritised

care home residents and the elderly in the vaccination programme, and I sincerely hope that families can continue to be reunited.

My grandma spent the last years of her life in The Valleys care home in Scunthorpe, and we were able to see her almost daily. We could not possibly have appreciated what a privilege that was, compared with the experience that people have had over the past year. We were in the slightly unusual position that grandma came to live in the care home in Scunthorpe from another authority. It is crucial that people with dementia and their families are really listened to. I am pleased to say that when she moved to North Lincolnshire, her needs were listened to, and so were we as a family, but that was in stark contrast with our experience of the previous local authority. Had my family not stood firm and really challenged the behaviour of the previous social services department, things would have been very different for my grandma.

I want to emphasise that this is not a sad story for our family. My grandma ultimately received a good quality of care, but we learned as a family some of the very real challenges that patients and families face. I still speak to constituents who are, quite frankly, overwhelmed with trying to navigate the diagnosis, the paperwork, the admin and the changes to their lives and that of their loved one. That should never be the case, and I urge the Government to do everything they can to ensure consistent standards across the country.

Navigating the admin side of a dementia diagnosis, on top of the care needs, can be immensely challenging. The deprivation of liberty order—or, as families call it, the DoLS order—is a power that needs to be used with great care and consideration. I am very much aware that not everybody has a family advocate and someone who can speak up for them. When we take forward our much needed plans for social care, I urge the Government to look not just at the care but at the whole system that delivers it, at the interaction between patients, families and services, and at how we can ensure that no patient is ever made to feel that their voice is not at the centre of their own lives.

I want to take this opportunity to recognise the dedication of our frontline carers. Looking to the future, our local schools and colleges are also working hard to provide the carers of the future. I want to thank Peggy's World in North Lincolnshire, and Tilly and her very hard-working team.

1.49 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is an absolute privilege to speak in this debate today, and to follow the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Holly Mumby-Croft). She spoke so poignantly about her family's journey with dementia care, and some of the issues that require to be addressed to improve that journey. Having such expertise in the House is excellent, because this issue will touch so many of our lives and it is important to bring the human aspect to dementia care.

We should remember, as we have all grappled with health issues over the past year, that wellbeing should also be at the forefront of the work we do, and that psychological and mental health are important alongside physical health needs. Certainly, in relation to older adults in care homes who have not been able to see relatives and the relatives who have much missed that

[Dr Lisa Cameron]

contact too, we are going to have to learn lessons from best practice right across the United Kingdom and have a key focus on wellbeing alongside that on physical health.

Dementia is a progressive, long-term health condition that affects about 90,000 people in Scotland currently. The Scottish Government are really committed to delivering a modern social care service for the 21st century, including building a national care service that will benefit people living with dementia, their families and carers. It is also my honour to speak today on behalf of the 5,322 people who live in my local NHS Lanarkshire health board who have been diagnosed with dementia, and on behalf of their relatives and loved ones, and the social and healthcare workers who care for them every single day with such dedication. I would also like to mention the East Kilbride & District Dementia Carers Group, which we hope will be up and running again as soon as possible, in line with the restrictions, because it provides the benefit from social communication, building self-esteem, confidence and social integration that people need, alongside having their physical health needs met.

I want briefly to raise the issue of those who have not yet been diagnosed with dementia. We know there was a drop of about 6% in diagnosis rates between the start of 2020 and February 2021 due to this pandemic. Accurate early diagnosis is absolutely crucial in identifying suitable candidates for clinical trials and available medication, which is most effective at the start of a dementia pathway. So it is very important that we have investment and support to get people diagnosed as early as possible, and that that is doubled up on in coming out of the pandemic. Alzheimer's Research UK estimates that 1.3 million people in the UK will be living with dementia by 2030, so it is of paramount importance that we do everything we can to ensure they have the best treatment and care possible.

The Scottish Government published the dementia and covid-19 action plan in December 2020 to build on and continue to expand the national action, since March 2020, on supporting people with dementia and their carers. This plan recognises the significant impact of the pandemic and the necessary response for people with dementia and their carers, and sets out 21 commitments to assess impact and respond to the needs of this group across all care settings at diagnosis and all parts of the dementia care journey.

We are very proud to be the only country in the UK with free personal care, which is extremely important in supporting people under the financial strains that dementia and living with dementia can place on families. The Scottish Government invested £700 million in 2019-20 to support free personal care for older people in Scotland, and extended it in April 2019 to all those under 65 who have a diagnosis of early dementia. There is a plan to increase social care investment by 25% over this Parliament, which is equivalent to over £840 million.

We are also extremely proud to have ensured a living wage of at least £9.30 per hour for social care staff. While we have been rightly clapping everybody in NHS and care settings every week, it is important that they are also financially rewarded for their excellent work. In this toughest of years, the Scottish Government have also included social care workers in the £500 bonus thank you payment, which they launched for NHS and care workers during covid.

I want to finish with another push for psychological therapies, and I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. My first job was in dementia care, where I led the memory clinic. It is so important that people have access to psychological care, including the musical therapy that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned earlier and reminiscence therapies, and that we treat people holistically—the whole person—and collaborate to ensure we share best practice on treatment.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak today. I look forward to listening to others' contributions.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I remind Members that there is a three-minute time limit on speeches, which will be displayed on the clock here and on the screens for those participating virtually.

1.56 pm

Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate, which comes at an important time. Last month, dementia overtook covid-19 to reassume its grim title of the leading cause of death in England and Wales. We also know that a quarter of covid deaths have been among those living with dementia. Dementia affects an ever-increasing number of people in the UK, which is presently estimated at 850,000, and it costs our economy £26 billion a year, more than any other disease. Like so many in this Chamber, I have personal family experience of it.

Finding a cure to Alzheimer's and the other less common types of dementia must be our aim. A cure would be a game-changer for so many. With 88% of people with dementia facing comorbidities, finding a cure would ultimately help to simplify care for hundreds of thousands of older people. To find a cure, clinical trials must be supported. While the 216 dementia trials since 2004 provide valuable information, that number appears insignificant when compared to the 2,900 studies for cancer over the same period. The UK Dementia Research Institute reports that effective treatments and preventions for dementia are within reach. Further progress on existing research provision is therefore essential.

Investment in dementia research comprises just 0.3% of the current costs we face as a result of dementia. In our 2019 manifesto, we pledged to launch a dementia moonshot to find a cure for dementia, doubling research funding and speeding up trials for new treatments. I very much look forward to its implementation as soon as possible. As a former clinical champion for dementia, I recognise that providing a diagnosis to individuals is pivotal to helping to ensure that they receive the necessary support. Early diagnosis is also critical when it comes to ensuring a sufficient cohort for clinical trials.

As part of the ongoing work on social care, will the Minister acknowledge that her Department is considering how to improve diagnosis rates further in all parts of the UK? Will she also comment on the value of technological advances in diagnosis, including the use of apps? Will she confirm that her Department recognises the value of a healthy diet and exercise when it comes to preventing or delaying dementia onset, something very relevant to the debate later today on obesity? As we look beyond the pandemic, which has had such a knock-on effect for those with dementia, I hope Ministers will

work to re-energise the fight against dementia in our best efforts to support the estimated 1.6 million people who will live with the disease by 2040.

1.58 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): As co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on dementia, I welcome this debate on Dementia Action Week. In Oldham, there are approximately 3,000 people living with dementia, more than six out of 10 of whom are living with a severe form of one of the many brain diseases that cause dementia. By 2030, that figure will be nearer 4,000.

Dementia Action Week provides an opportunity to highlight the urgent need for the Government to bring forward social care reform proposals. As such, I support the Alzheimer's Society's "Cure The Care System" campaign, which focuses on the need to reform social care funding and on driving up the quality of care for people living with dementia.

People with dementia are by far the largest user group of adult social care, but they face devastating care costs, often paying an additional 15% for their care provision. The average cost for someone with dementia or their family is £30,000 a year. Because of the lack of dementia training for our hard-working care staff and the continued disconnect between health and social care, people with dementia often receive inappropriate care. More and more of us will need dementia care, and more and more of us will become dementia carers for those we love, so it is vital that we get social care reform right.

For carers in the community, the pandemic has presented its own challenges. About half of carers are aged over 65, and they have undertaken an additional 92 million hours of care. This is unsustainable and the Government have to recognise that. It is vital that social care reform supports the needs of our army of family dementia carers by looking at respite provision. In addition, carers' assessments must be backed by the resources to support the needs identified. The Government cannot continue to just dump additional responsibilities on to local authorities while cutting their resources, particularly in areas such as mine.

The Government's forthcoming social care reforms provide an unmissable opportunity to cure the care system. While dementia as a condition is not yet curable, the care system is, as we have heard. I believe in the principle that healthcare and social care should be provided universally and free at the point of need, and that this is fundamental. In addition, I will be arguing that this should be provided through progressive taxation. The social care reforms also need to support people with dementia to live as they choose, keeping their independence as well as taking part in activities that they enjoy in environments that facilitate their wellbeing. Care needs to be truly person-centred, with control given to people in receipt of it. Lastly, our wonderful care staff must be valued and paid for their work.

Before I close, I want to recognise the impact that the pandemic has had on dementia research. As others have said, we need a commitment from the Government about fulfilling their promise on doubling dementia research, and I would be grateful if the Minister could include that in her closing remarks.

2.2 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this incredibly important debate. This year has been a year of great loss. We have witnessed the loss of loved ones, the loss of livelihoods and the loss of our usual freedoms and day-to-day routines. However, we have also seen an immense effort, on the part of our scientists and researchers, to produce a vaccine that is now allowing us to think about returning to life that resembles normality. I think there is a great lesson to be learnt and it is one that, for the most part, we all know to be true: when we focus our attention and come together with a common purpose, we can achieve great things. So as we continue along the road to reopening, we can begin to look at tackling other illnesses, including dementia, which is rapidly becoming one of the most heartrendingly cruel diseases of our times.

Dementia is now not only the leading cause of death in this country, but the only disease in the top 10 leading causes of death for which there is currently no treatment for either prevention or cure. Like many of my colleagues speaking this afternoon, I, too, have experienced this disease at first hand. Both of my grandmothers suffered from dementia and, as time went on, both went from being animated, proud, fun women who were very active in the lives of their families and wider communities to shadows of their former selves; dementia affects not only people's memory—as people here will know—but their ability to do even the most basic things. Eventually, both were left unable to speak. I vividly remember, as a little boy, lying in my bed praying that God would return my gran to the gran I knew when I was much younger and that she would, once again, be able to recognise me. Of course, it is not like that. Dementia affects not only those who are suffering, but the entire family. For example, for my maternal grandfather, his entire life became about caring for her.

My family's experience is not unusual. Rather, it is a story replicated hundreds of thousands of times across this country and others. While great progress has been made over the last 10 years in terms of improved diagnosis rates and increased public awareness, it is estimated that over one third of people affected by the condition still do not receive a formal diagnosis. In the case of my health board, NHS Grampian, 4,292 people were diagnosed with dementia in 2019. However, according to Alzheimer's Research UK, that figure is likely to be only the tip of the iceberg.

I support the Government's dementia strategy wholeheartedly and I welcome the steps being taken by the Scottish Government north of border. I want to see the UK as a whole become a world leader in treatment, care and research. But we must keep such intentions in sight and deliver on the commitments we have made. We must take advantage of the improvements in imaging, artificial intelligence and genetics and look to transform early detection so that treatment has at least a chance of being effective.

For all its sadness and turmoil, this year has proved that it is within our power, with the help of research and science, to deliver life-changing results. Let us therefore take heart from the vaccine success and seek to replicate that in meeting the challenge posed by the devastating and ever more prevalent disease that is dementia, so that little boys around the country will not be in the

[Andrew Bowie]

position that I was in, and that so many others are, of praying that their grandmother will be able to return to the person they once were.

2.5 pm

Matt Vickers (Stockton South) (Con): It is a privilege to speak in this important debate and to hear the thoughtful and moving contributions from across the Chamber. Dementia is an awful, horrific disease, not only for those who have been diagnosed but for family members who are condemned to witness the slow decline of a loved one. With dementia expected to affect one in three people born in the UK today and numbers set to double within the next decade, few of us will not see or experience the horrors of dementia at first hand.

I am sure we have all heard from constituents struggling to provide care to an elderly partner—sometimes while being ill, frail or elderly themselves, or balancing support for a mother or father alongside their career—and from elderly people who are having to lose their homes to provide for residential care. In Stockton-on-Tees, there are currently an estimated 2,665 people over 65 with dementia, almost 60% of whom live with a severe form of dementia and, as a result, require comprehensive support and social care provision.

Dementia is a condition that many still see as taboo and that carries with it the stereotype of being invisible or frail. It is important that we all remember that people have had a life before dementia and will continue to have a life thereafter. People with dementia must be treated with dignity and afforded the autonomy to continue living good lives after diagnosis, but we must still ensure that we have the right support in place to help sufferers.

We are lucky in my part of the world to have fantastic organisations such as Teesside Dementia Link Services, which provides invaluable support to dementia sufferers, their carers and families through support groups, activities and social events. Its work is second to none, and I know that it has made a huge difference to so many people's lives. I thank Gail, Mark and all their incredible volunteers for everything they do every day to support people through the toughest of times.

Finding a cure for dementia is a challenge that will define our generation. While we deal with the new pandemic of covid, we cannot forget that the pandemic of dementia has been around for generations. That is why I am delighted that the Government have made finding a cure one of their top priorities, committing to extra funding for research and speeding up trials for new treatments. Both the cure for dementia and reform of our social care system must be national priorities, so that we can provide light at the end of the tunnel for those who are suffering and those who work so hard to support them.

2.8 pm

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab) [V]: I express my gratitude to my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for securing this important debate. I pay tribute to the Alzheimer's Society for the vital work it undertakes in raising awareness of dementia, including organising the annual Dementia Awareness Week. I also thank every professional carer around the country, as well as those informal carers

who are all too often not recognised, despite working tirelessly to look after our loved ones, and who are an integral part of our care system.

Closer to home, I would also like to take this opportunity to highlight the inspiring fundraising work that one of my constituents, Councillor Janet Mobbs, has done for dementia sufferers over the years. Her mother, Mrs Edith Mobbs, lived with dementia during the latter part of her life, and each year Janet takes part in the memory walk with her family to raise funds for the Alzheimer's Society.

Dementia is a debilitating syndrome that affects more than 10 million people a year globally. That is equivalent to one new case being diagnosed every three seconds. Given that one in every six people in the UK aged over 80 lives with dementia, it is highly likely that Members will have a friend or loved one who has been impacted by this condition.

Dementia is not only a terrible syndrome to live with; it also takes a terrible toll on family members, who spend years caring for their loved ones, as my comrade Janet explained to me when she said: "My family found it difficult at first as we had little knowledge or understanding of dementia and how this affected mum. We experienced a bereavement but were unable to grieve as we lost the person mum had been long before she passed away. We struggled to cope with the emotional strain of our changing role in mum's life as we became carers for the person who had always cared for us."

Janet is not alone. In my constituency of Stockport, almost 4,500 people aged 65 and over have dementia and that is forecast to rise to almost 6,000 by the end of this decade. With the number of people living with dementia in the UK set to double to 2 million over the next 30 years, dementia is a syndrome that must be urgently addressed.

With the growing threat of dementia in our country, it is time that the Government outlined a proper settlement package for our social care sector, not least given the stark estimates that 70% of care home residents and more than 60% of home care recipients live with dementia. It should also not be overlooked that more than a quarter of the 130,000 UK covid deaths—some 34,000 people—died with dementia. That is truly shocking and shows how vulnerable people with the condition are.

The Government must face the reality that the root cause of rising numbers of dementia cases is years of chronic underfunding of our care system, which has left it struggling to cope and difficult to access. Furthermore, it has led to huge unfairness, with Alzheimer's Society research revealing that people with dementia will on average pay £100,000 over their lifetime for care. Understandably, this outrages and distresses the people affected and their loved ones. I urge the Government to take action.

2.11 pm

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): Both of my grandads had Alzheimer's disease, but they experienced widely different pathways with their condition. For my grandad Matty, his Alzheimer's was diagnosed at age 81 while living with my mam and dad, and he lived until the age of 86, finally saying goodbye to us during lockdown last year. But my grandad Mick had a rare form called posterior cortical atrophy.

In 2006, at the age of 62, Michael Garrity realised something was wrong. He looked for a diagnosis, but his GP told him and my grandma that he did not have

dementia. For five years my grandma fought to find out why he was struggling—why they were struggling. In that five years things became even harder. I remember he would sit and watch “The Weakest Link”, “Who Wants to be a Millionaire?” and “University Challenge” and get almost every answer right, but he would struggle to tie his shoes or find a way around the coffee table. He began taking bus journeys and forgetting where he was going and where he had been. It was not until 2011 that James Cook University Hospital noticed his PCA, five years after my grandad first saw his GP.

The problem is that those five years were lost time, when our family could have understood the disease better—how it would affect my grandad, how it would hit my grandma. In 2014, my grandad was finally admitted into care. Over the first six months, he was moved into a care home, then moved into a hospital, then to a new home, then into a psychiatric hospital and then into another new home. He was given the wrong medication, which escalated his condition. He became mute and developed new health problems, too. This was all because he had this unusual type of Alzheimer’s. He had high dependency and the care system could not find the right way to care for him. He died in his sleep in the early hours of 16 April 2018.

I spoke to my grandma this morning, I asked her what message she wanted me to get across today. It was simply that diagnosis is key and then support into the right care. For five years she fought to get the diagnosis my grandad needed, and earlier intervention may have prevented the horrific experience he went through in the early stages of his care.

It is clear from my experience that Alzheimer’s disease can hit people in completely different ways. In the last 12 months, we have invested in science and medicine like never before to deliver a viable covid vaccine at pace. We must have the same drive to attack this disease—to drive earlier diagnosis and new interventions to limit the effects and ultimately to develop a cure. We may never fully eradicate dementia, but learning more about it would mean those facing it are treated with the dignity they deserve. I miss my grandads dearly—we all do.

2.14 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD) [V]: It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Redcar (Jacob Young). It is, I suppose, inevitable that with as emotive a subject as dementia, this debate would be emotionally charged. Those of us with familial experience, or who have felt helpless as we watched friends cope with the heartbreak of watching their loved ones decline, know how much a dementia diagnosis demands of not just those affected but those closest to them. In my own family, we saw my father-in-law, Alastair MacDonald—a bright, intelligent, articulate journalist who had covered five world cups and Aberdeen’s victory in the UEFA cup in Gothenburg, written books with various footballers and one legendary Manchester United manager, and was once described as one of the best sportswriters of his generation—gradually struggle with everyday life. Vascular dementia, which he had, is characterised by problems with reasoning, planning, judgment, memory and other processes, caused by impaired blood flow to the brain. Like all forms of dementia, it is cruel, relentless and irreversible.

In my health board area, Lothian, there are currently more than 7,000 people living with a dementia diagnosis. Throughout this current crisis, their plight has been

accentuated, often by separation from their loved ones or because, in the case of someone I love dearly, although they are fortunate enough to be with their family, lockdowns and the current restrictions mean that their life lacks the stimulation they need to tackle the onset of the condition. His family have discovered that one of the most frustrating things is the lack of clarity in finding support. My cousin told me that you just kind of get signposted and have to manage and get on with it. Sadly, there are nearly a million people with dementia across the UK whose families are currently experiencing much the same, as they strive to get the vital support that they do not just need but deserve.

Underfunding and neglect over decades have left us with a care system in every part of the UK that is overstretched and inadequate to the challenge that families face daily. I know that all of us in the House recognise that and the need to continue to address it. We must work to change and improve a system that means that, as that wonderful organisation the Alzheimer’s Society has put it, a dementia diagnosis

“claims more than one life”

as families face its destructive effects.

Last week was Dementia Action Week. We know that we will probably not find the cure, but we must use the increased awareness to support organisations that are striving to mitigate the effects, improve care, increase research and find better treatments. We must find a cure for the system across the UK, to enable families to have the support and care and provide the love that their loved ones deserve.

2.17 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) and to have heard the rather moving story from my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Jacob Young).

Dementia affects people’s ability to think, learn and make rational judgments. Perhaps most sadly, it can make someone unable to recognise their loved ones. The side effects can be damaging, and include changes in people’s behaviour, emotional issues and lack of motivation. It is a truly awful situation, but it is heartening to see the work being done in Keighley and Ilkley by those who are suffering because of it. Dementia Friendly Keighley is a wonderful organisation that provides help to those with dementia, as well as supporting the family and friends of those who are affected. The group acknowledges the importance of the role the community plays in helping those with dementia by bringing together individuals, families, organisations and businesses to provide support. The group hosts weekly drop-in sessions that provide rest and relief for anyone with dementia and give patients’ carers a well-earned break.

There are so many brilliant volunteer organisations, but I do wish to pay tribute to Dementia Friendly Keighley and, in particular, one of the group’s members, Barbara Wood, whom I was lucky enough to meet in the summer. Throughout the past year, Barbara has continued to work exceptionally hard with Dementia Friendly Keighley, and her work is symbolic of the efforts of the entire group. I am pleased to see that Dementia Friendly Keighley’s impact in the community continues to grow. Recently, the Springbank care home in Silsden joined the growing list of places in my constituency recognised as being dementia friendly.

[Robbie Moore]

It is fantastic to see the work being done by local charities, but there is always more we can do at a national level. No treatment is currently able to cure dementia, and although it is encouraging to see numerous clinical trials being undertaken for potential treatments, we must do much more for those with dementia today. That includes increasing early diagnosis, which is crucial for treating the physical illness that can accompany dementia. Accelerating the detection of disease project that the Government are working on, in collaboration with businesses and charities, will go a long way to helping secure that. It is also encouraging that the Government have shown a commitment to finding a treatment for dementia. Like many, I was proud to stand on a manifesto in 2019 that pledged to double research funding going into looking for a cure. There is no denying that there are huge challenges to tackling this terrible disease, but I wholeheartedly hope that we all continue to look at this at pace.

2.20pm

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and I want to thank the Alzheimer's Society for its positive engagement with Members during Dementia Action Week. I also wish to note that 6 to 12 June is Lewy Body Dementia Awareness Week, which seeks to raise awareness about a common but seldom talked about form of dementia.

In Liverpool, just over 5,500 people are living with dementia, with that number set to increase by more than a quarter in less than a decade. Our ageing population means that the demand for social care services is set to increase dramatically. I refer to social care as the Cinderella service, one forgotten and avoided by successive Governments for too long. There has never been a more urgent time for reform of the sector. Its widely reported absence in the Queen's Speech was much cause for concern. The pandemic threatens real financial instability across the sector, exacerbating the long-established crisis in social care. Under-occupancy rates in care homes are up and care home providers are failing to keep pace with demand.

There must now be a real acceptance by Conservative Members of some unavoidable truths. The first is that the market is not capable of providing the answers on putting social care on a sustainable footing. No longer can we continue to rely on regressive forms of taxation such as council tax to properly fund care. Local government should lead the reforms, but it must have the resources to do so and be able to provide a modern service, in house, where diversity of choice is respected alongside the care workforce who provide the care. That means decent terms and conditions, including good wages, as well as the professionalisation of the sector, so that the workforce can grow and develop. A failure to do this will mean that the vacancy problem that exists across the sector will only worsen. If the levelling-up agenda is to be credible, social care reform should be front and centre of a strategy to reduce health inequalities in later life across all our regions.

My office and I are due to become dementia friends in the coming weeks. The information that Dementia Friends emphasises is that there is more to a person than their dementia. That sentiment should be at the heart of tailored dementia care that respects the needs

and wishes of individuals and, again, of the workers looking after our most vulnerable. In bringing forward their social care reform proposals, the Government have an opportunity to bring about real change. Based on their record to date, I will not be holding my breath.

2.23 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Today, we have heard some moving examples from colleagues, particularly my hon. Friends the Members for Scunthorpe (Holly Mumby-Croft) and for Stockton South (Matt Vickers), of their own family situations, to which many of us can relate. It is fair to say that every family has stories such as those to share. It is a sign of how far we have moved on from old stigmas that all of us can talk about this openly. My family is no exception, as my father looked after my mother for almost a decade. After she died, I said to him once, "I honestly do not think I could have done what you did." The answer came back, "You never know what you can do until you have to do it." Today, around the country, there are probably hundreds of thousands of people in different families who have been finding out how much they can do. Many of them would love to have done much more during this last year of the pandemic but were unable to do so for the reasons given by Members across the House, including social care difficulties and homes not being accessible.

We will never know the exact emotional, mental and physical cost to those who have suffered and are still suffering from dementia in care homes, unable to see those closest to them for so long, but we do know, as I know from my mother-in-law, that the more human contact they have with the people they love most, and the longer they have with those closest to them, the faster their own mental abilities will spark. That access to people with dementia in every family is incredibly precious, and I am sure the Minister is conscious of that.

Today, in this short time, I want to highlight the good work done by the NHS trusts in Gloucestershire and by charities to help people with dementia in my constituency of Gloucester and elsewhere. The introduction of the purple butterfly scheme in Gloucestershire Royal Hospital some years ago has proved very successful as a way of identifying patients who have dementia, making it easier for the nurses to understand the difficulties that patients may have in communicating. The introduction of so-called Admiral nurses who are trained in handling patients with dementia is also making a difference.

There are three questions I want to end with today. First, can the Minister comment on the research work on dementia of all kinds across the world that the former Prime Minister introduced at the G7? Secondly, what progress is being made on Alzheimer's research? Thirdly, the Minister herself said how important it was to have faster diagnosis of Alzheimer's and dementia, not because—unlike cancer—it will necessarily lead to saving lives, but because it can lead to a much better quality of life if it can be identified earlier. That is all I can say today, but I encourage everybody in this House to talk about what is such a difficult disease for so many people.

2.26 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am very pleased to be participating in this debate and, like others in this Chamber, I too have a relative living

with dementia. I have spoken about her before in this place: it is my mother-in-law, Iris, who is now completely debilitated by dementia. Only a few short years ago, she was an active and long-serving councillor on Glasgow City Council. She ran marathons and participated in them across the world from New York to Tokyo. She was always on the go and would think nothing of jumping on a plane just for the sheer joy of going sight-seeing, all by herself.

Iris was respected and held in deep affection by all who knew her, but in a sudden and dramatic decline, she became unable to look after herself and moved into a care home, something she found difficult to adjust to. Her essential spark was still there, and flashes of the old Iris were still discernible. However, her condition gradually progressed, as we know it does, and that accelerated during the pandemic. She is now completely beyond reach. She is locked in a world that must be bewildering for her. Her ability to communicate on almost any level is completely gone, and Iris is no longer recognisable as the spirited woman that she once was. That, as we have heard today, is a familiar story. Dementia is a cruel illness, where loved ones are both present and absent at the same time. It is bewildering for those living with the condition and heartbreaking for the family members affected.

The Scottish Government commissioned the independent Feeley review into adult social care and are seeking to build a national care service to support those in Scotland living with dementia—thought to be 90,000 people and their families and carers—as well as investing £9.2 million, benefiting around 83,000 unpaid carers through the pandemic. But what we really need, and what we must have, is more research into this dreadful and terrifying disease. We cannot risk the progress on research and treating dementia stalling or even slipping back. Early diagnosis is considered hugely important to dementia sufferers, as there is evidence that, caught at an early stage, it is more treatable and progression can be slowed, so I urge the Minister today to press on with the movement and encourage momentum behind the research on this awful condition, which we know will affect 1.3 million people in the UK by 2030. We cannot allow any more time or opportunities to pass us by as we seek to support those living with, or at risk of, dementia.

2.29 pm

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con) [V]: Like many other hon. Members, my family has also been touched by dementia. My grandmother spent her final days in a care home and suffered from Alzheimer's disease. The woman who looked after me when I was a small child was taken from us, but her story was not a sad one: she lived a long life, had regular visits from her family, and, crucially, was loved. My mother was also a nurse and a deputy sister caring for those with Alzheimer's disease, and my father was a care home manager in Peterborough, providing love, care, and a home to those with dementia. The condition is a progressive one and brutally attacks people's ability to think and communicate. It takes away who you are. It is an evil condition, but I am thrilled that the Minister has such a strong commitment to finding a cure.

As many other hon. Members have remarked, the Government's promise to double funding for dementia research and speed up progress in clinical trials is incredibly welcome. The dementia moonshot could be a game-changer and now is the time to deliver on that pledge. As Alzheimer's

Research says, the UK is well placed to capitalise on research. We have a vibrant, diverse research ecosystem thanks to a variety of research and funding sources. This, together with the reform of the social care system, has to be a national priority.

As a member of the Health and Social Care Committee, I have heard some very uncomfortable stories about how those with dementia have had delays in diagnosis, difficulty in accessing care packages, and, ultimately, unhappy experiences at the end of their life. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Jacob Young) that we need to adopt the same attitude to finding a cure for dementia as we have done to the wonderful combined effort that has gone into searching for a covid vaccine.

I wish to pay tribute to everyone at the Alzheimer's Society in Peterborough and the Dementia Resource Centre in my constituency who do such wonderful and marvellous work.

Finally, I want to mention a meeting that I have had with the Alzheimer's Society and the worrying rise in the prescribing of anti-psychotic medication to people with dementia during the covid-19 pandemic. A total of 6,195 over-65s in Peterborough and Cambridgeshire have a formal diagnosis of dementia. Figures from Cambridgeshire and Peterborough show that 656 dementia patients aged 65 and over were prescribed these anti-psychotic drugs, which is up from 619. I understand that the Department of Health and Social Care is monitoring the monthly data, but I hope that there will soon be some action to address this issue.

2.32 pm

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab) [V]: Members from across the House are making some excellent and emotive points, particularly on the impact that dementia can have on our elderly population and their loved ones across the UK.

As ever, our incredible social care workers across the country have played a vital role throughout the coronavirus pandemic. I am particularly proud that it is the Labour Government in Wales who have not just clapped for our carers, but paid them, too, with a special thank you payment for NHS and social care staff, which has benefited more than 220,000 people.

Today, I will, if I may, draw attention to another worrying trend, which is the rise in dementia diagnoses for athletes who have dedicated their lives to their sport. I am extremely proud to sit on the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee. Our inquiry into concussion in sport has heard some extremely shocking evidence. In March, we were told by Dr Willie Steward, a consultant neuropathologist at the University of Glasgow, that women and girls face double the risk of concussion and developing brain injuries from playing sport. The links between dementia and sports such as football and rugby have certainly been receiving more attention over the past few years. Indeed, back in 2017, colleagues may be aware that the BBC documentary fronted by former footballer Alan Shearer explored these links. At the time, Shearer said that his motivation to participate was fuelled by his personal concerns that the rates of dementia might be higher in retired footballers than in the general population.

This issue is not just connected to football. A group of 40 rugby league stars, all under the age of 55, are currently in the process of launching sport's first

[Alex Davies-Jones]

dementia-related court case. All 40 of those former players are showing symptoms of dementia and blame concussions and head injuries suffered during their careers for their current prognosis. Many of those athletes played at the elite super league level and now have plans to take action by suing the governing body, the Rugby Football League, for negligence. It simply is not good enough.

It is clear that we have long way to go until the issue of concussion in sport and the subsequent links to dementia are properly investigated and addressed by those at the very top, but in February the Premier League announced that it will add additional permanent concussion substitutions to improve the management of possible neurological head injuries in football. That is of course a welcome step, and I hope that other governing bodies and boards will follow suit across all sports.

However, for industries such as professional wrestling that remain unregulated the links between concussion and dementia are likely to persist. I have spoken passionately about my role as the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on wrestling a number of times in this House, and I draw attention to our recent inquiry, which highlighted the importance of concussion protocols across the industry.

There are some excellent charities out there, including the fantastic Head for Change in south Wales and the Alzheimer's Society campaign "Sport united against dementia" that are working hard to change things for the better, but they urgently need more support. I sincerely hope that the Minister is listening and taking my concerns, and those of so many others, on board and seriously, and will work with colleagues in DCMS towards meaningful change to protect lives.

2.35 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): The House is at its best on occasions such as this when we can demonstrate that we are members of the human race. We have heard some very heartfelt stories. Dementia is a heartbreaking illness for those who suffer from it and for the family and friends of the person so afflicted. It is very stressful when someone is admitted to hospital and those they know are told that they have dementia, and it turns out to be a urine infection.

With the coronavirus pandemic dominating the headlines for over a year, many other health conditions that existed before and continue to do harm have been somewhat put aside. The issues surrounding dementia can be loosely broken up into two concerns: the health complications and the financial structures. We should not accept dementia as simply a part of growing old. It is a real issue, and is the leading cause of death in England. Currently 850,000 people are living with the condition in the UK.

Our wonderful national health service staff and health professionals have done a brilliant job of delivering the successful vaccination programme, but people with dementia have been worst hit by the pandemic, accounting for over a quarter of all covid-19 deaths. The percentage of those in Southend West—we have the highest number of centenarians in the country—with the condition is higher than the average for England, and the east of England and Essex. This is not a health problem that

we can ignore; it is a serious local and national issue, although we have some wonderful care homes in Southend that are doing magnificent work on dementia.

Dementia is so different from many other health problems because the NHS does not always cover it free of charge. Our party's manifesto committed to seeking cross-party consensus to bring forward reform proposals, and stated that

"no one needing care has to sell their home to pay for it."

I have received emails from worried constituents with financial concerns about paying for their own healthcare or for that of elderly family members. I am pleased that reform of the social care system was mentioned in the Gracious Speech, and I hope that the Government ensure that no one has to lose their principal private family residence and their savings to pay for healthcare.

For individuals, relying on the carer's allowance to support their family members struggling with dementia is proving extremely difficult during the coronavirus pandemic and an adjustment is needed. A financial barrier is stopping people receiving life-saving care and attention, and that needs changing. I urge the Government to implement cross-party talks and explain what steps will be taken to ensure that dementia healthcare is affordable for all. I have previously raised that issue in the Chamber and in questions.

Dementia is the only condition of the top 10 leading causes of death in the UK for which there is no treatment to prevent, cure or slow its progression. The rapid development of treatments and vaccines for covid-19 showed us what science can achieve with political will and the right resources and collaborations.

2.38 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak on this issue, which is incredibly important to many of us in the United Kingdom. Last week was Dementia Action Week, which reminded us all of how important it is. Dementia has touched many lives all too often. I am sure that all of us present know of someone who has been diagnosed with dementia. Some people have spoken of personal relationships. I have had a number of friends who have also, unfortunately, had dementia. It is one of the leading causes of death in the United Kingdom.

Statistics from Alzheimer's UK indicate that some 850,000 people in the United Kingdom are living with dementia. Some 20,000 of those people live in Northern Ireland, and unfortunately there are 1,152 in my constituency. For those with dementia who reside in care homes the generalisation of memory loss is simply not enough. I believe that we need to consider the long-term effects that patients have suffered from not being able to seek comfort through seeing loved ones as often as needed. A constant feeling of fright, anxiety and loneliness has consumed the minds of dementia patients.

I mentioned the Music for Dementia charity in an earlier intervention on the Minister, and she was kind in her response. It is important that music is introduced to people with dementia because it can help them. The Department must consider research into the benefits of music, and a UK-wide strategy to implement such support would be welcome.

There are things that we can do ourselves to reduce the risk of developing dementia, such as taking care of our diet, getting plenty of regular exercise and stimulating our mental health. But people are not always to blame for what happens.

The Alzheimer's Society's recent "Cure the Care System" campaign highlights the struggles of looking after those with dementia, and I want to speak up for the carers. Some 700,000 unpaid carers are looking after people living with dementia across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I find that astonishing, and more work must be done to offer them sufficient respite. The responsibilities, as I know from friends and their families, can become overwhelming, and it is crucial that carers know that help and support are available. The people supporting those who live with dementia have proved their dedication to this country, and it is our duty in this House and across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to ensure that they are protected in society today.

I conclude by thanking the Alzheimer's Society, Music for Dementia and all the other charities. They should know—I put it on the record today—that their work is appreciated by so many, including me and every other elected representative and every carer who depends on them.

2.41 pm

Liz Kendall: It has been an honour to take part in this debate. It is all too rare for Members to talk so much about what has happened to them personally and to the people they love. We are here to help and support people when they are going through difficult times, so the House can be at its best when we show that we are human.

I will not forget these stories of the people we have loved and the people we have lost. The hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) talked about being a little boy and lying on his bed praying that his grandmother would go back to being the person he once knew. When the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) spoke about his parents, I was thinking—I know this from my own family and friends—"How on earth could you have gone through and done all that?" and he said, "You never know what you can do until you have to do it."

I really feel a sense among people here that we want to help families more, and help them deal with not only the emotional strain, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) mentioned, but the financial strain. I firmly believe that we should help people to help both themselves and one another. I spoke quite a lot about the absolute need not just to involve families, but to see them as genuine partners in the care process because, with dementia, we cannot give good quality care unless we support families.

Staff also play an absolutely vital role, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Paula Barker). They have gone above and beyond the call of duty, especially during this pandemic. As part of the social care reforms, we urgently need a national strategy to transform the pay, training, and terms and conditions of the care workforce. We saw high vacancy and turnover rates before the pandemic, and half of all domiciliary care workers are on zero-hours contracts.

We need to value staff and treat them like the professionals they are, because they are so important to the quality of care. I hope that the Minister will say

something about that when she closes this debate. I am proud that the Labour Government in Wales did not just take part in claps for carers, but gave them a special payment. We need a much more long-term, sustainable solution there.

My hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) secured the debate, and, as she said, the bottom line is that we need social care reform. The truth is that our politics has been far too slow in devising a solution to this long-standing issue. As my mother would say to me, "It can't be a surprise that we're all living longer, Liz. You knew when we were born." Her words will always echo in my ears.

As the brilliant group Social Care Future has argued, "we all want to live in the place we call home with the people... we love, in communities where we look out for one another, doing the things that matter to us".

The basic aspiration that older and disabled people should have the freedom and support to live a life like everyone else should not be regarded as extraordinary, yet in the 21st century, in one of the richest countries in the world, this is where we have ended up after years of political failure.

A long-term solution to the challenges facing social care, including for those with dementia, is not just desirable; it is essential. We cannot level up our country or build a better future or ensure we all look forward to living longer—not fear it—unless we invest in and reform social care. We heard lots of examples of what people are trying to do within the existing system, often against all the odds. We need a reformed system. We need to understand that social care is as important as the NHS. We have to understand that the two are inextricably linked.

We all—not just today in the debate and not just in relation to health and social care, but across society—need to understand that getting older and all these issues are not going to happen to someone else; they are going to happen to us all. Very few people want to think about what it really means to be very, very old, but one baby in four born today is set to live to 100. We need the House and the country to take long-term decisions, which our constituents and future constituents need. It really is time to act.

2.47 pm

The Minister for Care (Helen Whately): I thank all Members who have spoken in the debate, and spoken so powerfully, time and again drawing on their personal experience of dementia in their family. That is a sign not only of the prevalence of dementia, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) pointed out, of how much the stigma of dementia is being overcome.

My hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Holly Mumby-Croft) spoke about her family experience, but also about the importance of listening to family and the challenges of navigating the system and the administration involved for a family coming to terms with a diagnosis, who have to go through so many processes.

My hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd (Dr Davies) spoke about the importance of diagnosis with respect to not only the support that people need, but providing a cohort for trials and for research. He drew on his clinical experience, as well as his personal

[Helen Whately]

experience, and rightly mentioned the importance of the prevention of dementia and the role of diet and exercise in that.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) spoke about how dementia affects the whole family. Very movingly, he spoke of how it affected him when his grandmother lost her power to speak, and of how he used to pray for her to return to being the person she once was.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South (Matt Vickers) spoke about how many of those who care for someone with dementia may be frail themselves or may be holding down a job. He also spoke about Teesside Dementia Link Services and the huge difference that makes for those with dementia and their carers.

My hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Jacob Young) spoke about his grandads' very different experiences with dementia, and about the importance of treating those who suffer with dementia with the dignity that they deserve.

My hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore) spoke about Dementia Friendly Keighley, which so effectively brings people together and provides support for patients with dementia and for carers. He particularly mentioned Barbara Wood, who he said was symbolic of the efforts of the group.

My hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Paul Bristow) spoke about how his grandma suffered from Alzheimer's and referred to his experience as a result of his father running a care home. He spoke about our opportunity to take the same attitude to curing dementia as to the covid vaccination. He is absolutely right: this is a moment in time. We can look at how we have pulled together as a country and how the public and private sectors, scientists, healthcare specialists and others have come together to develop a vaccination for covid; it was forecast at the outset that that might take five or six years, yet here we are with so many millions of people already vaccinated. He also spoke about the antipsychotic medication of those with dementia during the pandemic. As he said—he has contacted me about this—we are working with the NHS to keep a very close eye on the situation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) talked about the importance of reform, including the reform of funding so that people do not have to sell their homes to pay for care. As I have said, we are absolutely determined to bring forward the reforms of social care that we have committed to bringing forward this year.

I want to touch on some of the comments by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall). She spoke very movingly in her winding-up speech and made important points about social care

reform. She said that it is not just about reform for those who are receiving care right now—our mums and dads, for instance, or our grans and grandads. Many of us will also need care, and so will our children and grandchildren as people live longer. We need a system for ourselves and all those we love that we can be confident provides the care that we want and need.

In her opening speech, when the hon. Lady spoke about the response to the pandemic, she clearly did not hold back in what she said, which may be a sign that she shares my sorrow about the many lives lost to covid. She knows how hard this Government have worked to protect and support people who receive social care, and she knows how hard it has been for care homes in England, but also in Wales, where there is a Labour Government, in Scotland under the SNP Administration, and in many countries around the world.

In a pandemic it is impossible to get everything right, but we have provided unprecedented support to social care and care homes over the past year. Once again, I thank all those who have been involved, including the Department of Health and Social Care team, Public Health England, Skills for Care, the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services, the Local Government Association, local authorities, organisations that we have worked with, such as the National Care Forum, the National Care Association, the United Kingdom Homecare Association, Care UK, Age UK and Carers UK—I could go on, because there have been many of them. I also thank the care providers, the care users and the care workers themselves—the care workforce, who have been on the frontline and have done so much to look after those they care for, through such difficult times.

This is a moment in time, not only for social care reform but for dementia. Yes, we must restore the diagnosis rates and go further. We must make sure that the support is there for individuals with dementia and their carers. We must do more on prevention, because it is estimated that a third of dementia cases are preventable. The Government must, and will, follow through on our commitment to research effective treatments for dementia and find—sooner rather than later—a cure.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Dementia Action Week.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I will suspend the House for a brief moment for the sanitisation of both Dispatch Box covers and the safe exit and arrival of the main players.

2.54 pm

Sitting suspended.

Obesity Strategy 2020

[Relevant document: Sixth Report of the Women and Equalities Committee, Session 2019-2021, Changing the perfect picture: an inquiry into body image, HC 274.]

2.56 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jo Churchill): I beg to move,

That this House has considered implementing the 2020 Obesity Strategy.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) on securing this important debate on something I know he is passionate about and about which I have met him on many occasions.

Currently 64% of all adults and 30% of children are classified as overweight or living with obesity. This masks the fact that in some areas the figure is as high as three in four adults. It is a complex issue that has a huge cost not to only the health and wellbeing of the individual but to the NHS and the wider economy. It makes individuals susceptible to a plethora of illnesses. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Minister for Care, who was at the Dispatch Box for the previous debate, commented to me that if we could get the general weight of the population down we would help people with more exercise and a better diet, as well as the health trajectory of those who live with dementia.

Covid has shone a light on why it is more important than ever that we need to get the nation healthy. Obesity is the only modifiable risk factor for covid-19 and a major modifiable risk factor for other diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular, and some cancers—in point of fact, many. We are therefore at a teachable moment in which we can change attitudes, educate and influence drivers around less than healthy dietary and physical activity, and motivate behaviours so that they change. Helping people to achieve and maintain a healthy weight is one of the most important things we can do to improve our nation's health, and we all have a role to play in meeting the challenge. It is complex. There is no silver bullet. There is no single source of responsibility. It will take action from all of us to work together to achieve our ambition—from the producer, to the processor, to the retailer, to the customer, with quite a dollop of influencing the environment through actions we in Government and in Parliament take and are taking.

Our strategy to meet the challenge, published last July, is far-reaching in its ambition. It reflects the significant work undertaken over the past four years to halve childhood obesity. Currently two out of every five children who enter primary school are overweight or obese. That number rises in the six years they are at primary school to three out of every five children.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): On the Government's ambition, the Minister said very clearly, and it says in the strategy, that we want to halve childhood obesity by 2030. The strategy also says,

“reduce the number of adults living with obesity”,

although I looked and could not find a specific target. Is she able to set out what the Government think that trajectory should look like? What I am concerned about—she will see this when I make my remarks later—is that there are lots of practical measures in the strategy, but I

am struggling to see how the Government will actually deliver the result, which is fewer people being overweight or obese. Having some milestones on that journey, rather than just waiting until 2030, would be helpful so we can judge whether it is working and make some course corrections.

Jo Churchill: I understand why my right hon. Friend is calling for milestones but, although the problem is a national one, there are different numbers for the proportion of the population that is overweight or living with obesity in each area. We can set milestones, but a national milestone may mask whether we are achieving what we need to achieve in the areas—often the more deprived areas in our communities—where we need to help, encourage, support and educate people to get them further on this journey. I will listen attentively to his contribution, as I always do, and then I may come back to him in my closing speech.

Three out of five children are overweight or obese by the time they leave primary school. We know that there is a direct correlation between the dietary habits picked up early in life and behaviour later on. We are working to create the right health environment to support people, and I will set out briefly some of the actions we are taking, starting with out-of-home calorie labelling. Restrictions laid in the House on 13 May will require large businesses in England with 250 or more employees, including restaurants, cafés and takeaways, to display calorie information for non-pre-packed food and soft drink items that they sell. Many have already gone some way in doing that. These regulations will support customers to make informed, healthier choices when eating out or purchasing a takeaway.

As I said, many businesses have articulated to me that they understand fully the importance of providing information and being proactive in leading the way. They recognise the demand from their customers for more information so that they can pursue a healthier lifestyle. Smaller businesses currently do not fall within the scope of the regulations.

We have also listened carefully throughout the consultation period to individuals and stakeholders who have the challenge of living with eating disorders. We feel we have been careful and sensitive and have put in reasonable adjustments to help that group. We have also exempted schools from the requirement to display calorie information, given the concern about children in school settings. We have included a provision in the regulations allowing business to provide a menu without calorie information on request.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The Minister knows that I have had a number of conversations about calorie counting. What really concerns me is the evidence base for whether this will really reduce the number of people suffering from obesity. As she knows, I am very concerned about the effects on people suffering from an eating disorder, and so far there is no evidence that it will make a significant difference to those who suffer from obesity. Can she provide me with some numbers or assure me that there will be a constant watch on how this is actually affecting those with obesity?

Jo Churchill: If the hon. Lady allows, I will go through the rest of my contribution. I hope she will take away that this is about building blocks. As I said, it is a

[Jo Churchill]

complex situation, and there is no silver bullet. We must look at the antecedents of both conditions, including the link to mental health for those who suffer from anorexia and certain other eating disorders, and at some of the broader challenges when we are looking at those who are overweight or living with obesity. They need to be taken in the round, but one cannot be cancelled out against the other.

Mr Harper *rose*—

Jo Churchill: I am going to push on just a bit, and then I will of course come back to my right hon. Friend.

We are also taking action to stop the promotion of less healthy products by volume and prominent locations online and in store. We want to support shoppers to purchase healthier options and shift the balance of promotions that way by maximising the availability of healthier products. We still need to eat, and we are not banning anything, but we are trying to educate, encourage and make people aware, so that they have the option of a healthier choice by default.

Last December, we confirmed that we will legislate on the promotion of foods high in fat, salt and sugar in stores and online. This will apply to medium-sized and large businesses—those with more than 50 employees—in England, and it will come into force next year. I would like to congratulate and thank those large retailers that are already taking these steps, because the argument is often put forward that it is unaffordable for a business to do this, yet many of the large retailers are doing it.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for outlining some of the measures she is asking businesses to undertake. She will appreciate that the last year has been very difficult for all businesses. As a Health Minister, she perhaps has not been able to have as much engagement with business, so would she take up the opportunity, ahead of the implementation in June, to come and visit Jordans & Ryvita, a cereal manufacturer in my constituency—she may have some familiarity with it—so that she can listen to its points of concern about the proposals she is making?

Jo Churchill: My hon. Friend and I have spoken about Jordans. Indeed, my first job was selling Jordans Crunchy bars at county shows when I was—oh—several decades younger. I will of course be happy to talk to him after this, but I would also gently point out that I have British Sugar, which is also in this food group, in my constituency. I not only meet its representatives on a regular basis, but I also met as lately as yesterday representatives from the British Retail Consortium and the Food and Drink Federation.

Mr Harper: The intervention I was going to make when the Minister was dealing with the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) was on the impact assessment for the regulations she mentioned. I have looked very carefully at the evidence, and it seems to me that the best case for these regulations is that we will reduce the number of calories consumed by 80, which is an apple, and the worst case will reduce it by about eight, which is a 10th of an apple. It seems to me that the cost of these regulations simply is not justified by the outcomes.

Because the Minister did not take my intervention at that time, she went on to talk about the legislation for promotions online, and I have looked at this. The Government's goal for this legislation is that it reduces the calorie consumption by 8 billion calories. That sounds like a lot, but if we look at the number of children in the period that is spread over, it is equivalent to each child eating one fewer Smartie a day. Given that the children who have the most serious obesity problem are consuming up to 500 calories a day, reducing their calorie consumption by three calories a day simply does not do it.

The Government's ambition is correct, but I just have a real worry that these particular measures simply will not have the effect that the Government and all of us wish to happen.

Jo Churchill: I am very glad that my right hon. Friend is joining me in the ambition of wanting to get the weight of the nation down. I would gently push back, and say that I do not recognise those calorie figures. I am sure we can have a longer discussion over where that evidence base is drawn from, and about the fact that there is actually a much greater impact. As I have pointed out on two or three occasions, this is about the building blocks of all these different measures coming together, and they will be monitored and assessed as we go through.

Another element of the environment is advertising. Currently, we are failing to protect children from over-exposure to high-fat, salt and sugar products via advertisements on both television and online platforms. I would gently say that if adverts did not influence people, they would not be used. Therefore, to help tackle the current situation, let us just see more advertising of healthy food. It always strikes me as quite interesting when watching a diet programme on the television that each ad break is often interspersed with adverts for high-fat, salt and sugar products. This does not affect the advertising industry's revenue, because there is still a need to advertise and people still need to eat, but the foods advertised often do not reflect the balance that we need to enjoy a healthy life.

Richard Fuller: Will the Minister give way?

Jo Churchill: I am going to push on, I am afraid.

The Queen's Speech on 11 May confirmed our intention to take that measure forward through the health and care Bill, and the Government aim to publish the consultation response as soon as is practicable. Many people objected to the sugar drinks industry levy, saying that it would mean a decline in sales. Five years on, we have seen a decline of around 44% in sugar in soft drinks. Revenue raised has often been diverted into sports activities in schools and so on, and sales have risen to over 105% of what they were in the beginning.

Information helps the consumer; it also helps manufacturers and retailers to look at diversifying their products, and much of the customer research, including the McKinsey report—I think it was put out by the Food and Drink Federation, but it might have been the British Retail Consortium—shows that this is the direction in which customers want retailers and manufacturers to go.

We want to take this measure into alcohol labelling, as well. As we know, each year around 3.4 million adults consume an additional day's worth of calories

each week from alcohol, which is the equivalent of an additional two months' worth of food a year. Despite that, the UK drinks industry is not required to provide any information on how many calories each drink contains, and up to 80% of adults have no knowledge at all.

Action to ensure that people can make an informed, educated choice is what we want, and we will be publishing a consultation shortly on the introduction of mandatory calorie labelling on pre-packed alcohol and on alcohol sold in the on-trade sector. Once again, it is interesting to note that this labelling happens to a large degree with most low-alcohol content drinks and in many own brands, so the measure is merely about ensuring that customers can feel fully informed.

Turning to weight management services, on 4 March, we announced £100 million of extra funding for healthy weight programmes to support children, adults and families to achieve and maintain a healthier weight. More than £70 million of that will be invested into weight management services made available through the NHS and local authorities, enabling some 700,000 adults to access the support that can help them lose weight. It includes digital apps, weight management groups, individual coaches and specialist clinical support.

There has been a fantastic response from local authorities to the planned roll-out of these services. It shows the widespread need and support for helping people achieve a healthier weight and is an example of the importance of partnership in action. The remaining £30 million will go to: funding initiatives to help people maintain that weight, because we know that weight lost can often be quickly regained; giving access to the free NHS 12-week weight loss plan app; continuing the Better Health marketing campaign to motivate people to make healthier choices; improving services and tools to support healthy growth in early years and childhood; and helping up to 6,000 families and their children to grow, develop and have a healthier lifestyle and weight. In addition, we will invest in helping people access the weight management services and support they need through a range of referral routes across the health system.

We are also looking at incentives and incentivising healthier behaviours. We have committed £6 million to developing a new approach to health incentives. The aim is to support people towards adopting healthier behaviours. That work will be supported by Sir Keith Mills, who pioneered reward programmes such as air miles and Nectar points. It will look at the best innovation to motivate people drawn from not only the public sector, but the private sector.

Since it is critical that a child has the best start in life, we are also working to improve infant food and the information around it. We will consult shortly on proposals to address the marketing and labelling of commercial food and drink products for infants and young children—to reiterate what Dame Sally Davies has said, there is the halo effect, where we think what we are purchasing for our children is healthy, but potentially it is not—so that parents and carers can have clear and honest information that aligns with advice on the products that they feed their children and babies, giving every child the best start in life.

We are not alone in working to address the challenges of obesity; it is pretty much a global problem. The effect of collaboration internationally is critical for us all to learn. The UK has established effective working

partnerships with, for example, Mexico, Chile and Canada, as well as international organisations such as the World Health Organisation. I have had discussions with some of my counterparts across the world, including those leading on measures such as health incentives. Through partnerships we share best practice and ensure our interventions are based on experience and the evidence.

Tackling obesity and helping people to maintain a healthy weight is, as I have said, an extremely complex issue, and that is reflected by the wide range of action we are taking. Of course, we would like to move more quickly and have a magic solution, and there is more that we want to do, but I recognise the scale of the policy we are bringing forward. It is a far-reaching and radical plan to reduce obesity in our society; I do not want us to carry on being second in a league table in which we should not be proud of being second.

The high prevalence of obesity in adults and children has been decades in the making. It is going to take time to see results from our interventions, and we may want to go back and change some of them. There is no single fix and no single point of responsibility. We all have a part to play and it is vital for us all—Government, Parliament, industry, employers, the health service, the wider public sector and all of us as individuals—to work together. I am really looking forward to what I anticipate will be a very varied set of contributions this afternoon.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): There will be a three-minute limit on all Back-Bench contributions from the very beginning.

3.16 pm

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to open this important debate on behalf of the Opposition.

Obesity is a significant public health challenge in this country. It is a growing problem that compounds down the years in missed potential and accelerated poor health. I am glad the obesity strategy recognises that, as well as being a matter for individuals in their personal choices, there is a significant impact from our environment. As such, we have a responsibility in this place to do what we can to help people to maintain a healthy weight.

Almost two thirds of adults are overweight or living with obesity—I am one of them—and we have heard that a staggering number of our children leave primary school overweight. This is an unequally distributed problem, with hospital admissions due to obesity nearly three times greater in poorer communities than they are in the best-off communities. At a population level, it is clear that excess weight brings with it increased risk of diseases such as diabetes, cancer, heart disease, liver disease and, of course, associated mental health conditions. In 2019-20—this is such a staggering figure—there were over 1 million hospital admissions for which obesity was either the primary or secondary cause. That was up 17% on the year before, and represents a 600% increase on the previous decade. That is an extraordinary changing picture and one that should kick us all into action. We have also seen in the last year that living with excess weight makes us more vulnerable when fighting the effects of covid. As the Minister says, it is one of the risk factors we can actually make a direct and swift impact on. It is clear that we need to act.

[Alex Norris]

I have said before when we have debated this topic that where the Government bring forward sensible proposals, we shall work with them to implement them in the national interest. Happily, the 2020 strategy contains many such proposals that we are very keen indeed to see implemented. The 9 pm watershed on unhealthy food adverts is prudent. Efforts to curb the promotions and prominent placements of things that we know are bad for us is a good idea, too. Sometimes, even when we are trying to make healthy choices it feels like we cannot escape reminders of those other options. An expansion of NHS weight management services is well overdue, and I hope we will empower such services to use all effective treatments and resource them to be able to do so, too. Traffic lighting is a valued and effective tool in understanding what our food comprises of. We will support proposals that strengthen and develop that system, and I hope we hear a little bit more about that later. A national-level publicity campaign is valuable and we will support its introduction. There is so much to agree with and I have consistently said so to the Minister. Indeed, the only addition I will contribute here is that we need to get on with it and that we do not have time to waste. There are elements, however, that I want to probe and seek reassurance on from the Minister.

On the total online advertising ban, I do not think it is a secret that the Government do not do online policy very well. I think the ever-running saga of the online harms Bill shows that. Online advertising is complex and sophisticated and is changing all the time. I am conscious of concerted efforts by those in the advertising industry to seek to offer the Government a way of delivering on this goal that reflects their expertise in this area. I hope to get an assurance from the Minister that officials are at least talking to them about that and taking it seriously.

On the restrictions on retailers, I hope that we will get a proper chance to understand and debate the qualifiers on square footage and staffing levels. I do not think we would want to be in a situation where this ends up affecting relatively few organisations, creating an unlevel playing field or promoting perverse outcomes, such as having fewer staff. I would be interested to hear from the Minister in that regard.

Crucially, we heard from the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) about calories on menus. I know that that has public support, and support from many campaigners, but if we effect that, it really must be done correctly and properly. I strongly do not believe that before they sought to publicise that and press on the Government have given enough consideration to those with eating disorders who will be negatively impacted.

Richard Fuller: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for cantering through his support for the Government. I just want to take him up on his first principles and the rationale, from his philosophical point of view, for why he believes the Government have a right and a responsibility to manage what people eat and how they look. Does he put obesity on the same level as the tobacco industry of the past? Obviously, health measures were taken because of the harmful effect that tobacco could have on people. If he does not put it on that level, what level does he put it on? Does he put it on the same level as alcohol, which causes a lot of poor health? If not, does he believe that we ought to be doing more on alcohol?

Alex Norris: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that contribution. Philosophically, I believe that the state has a responsibility to act when we acknowledge evidence that we have an environment that promotes poor health in this way, so that it goes beyond our personal choices and the way in which we want to lead our lives to things that swamp us. I reject his characterisation of a hierarchy. I would consider the impact that it has on the public and, indeed, the pressures it creates. As for alcohol, I would absolutely support stronger alcohol strategy proposals from the Government, as I would an updated and refreshed version of the tobacco control plan, which we have been waiting on for many months. Again, I would not establish a hierarchy, but I think we can act in those areas and that we ought to.

The hon. Gentleman recognised the support that I had given so far, but I am afraid that that is now about to change—it is not just because of him, I promise. On calories on menus, we have seen the instrument. The impact assessment is comprehensive—it has five different options, 235 paragraphs, four annexes—yet eating disorders are afforded one mention covering three paragraphs before being discarded in a fourth. I do not think that that is sufficient or that due regard has been paid, and I hope that the Minister will revisit it. Alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan), I am seeking to bring together stakeholders who reflect a full range of views on this topic to forge a solution that realises important health benefits for one group but is not injurious to another section of society. I hope that the Minister is still in listening mode on the matter and might seek to do something similar.

That leads me to what I am saddest about with this strategy; the Minister knows about it, because I have raised it with her many times. Rather than having just an obesity strategy, we ought to have a healthy weight strategy. Eating disorders are increasingly common and can blight people for their whole lives, and their lives and voices are missing from the strategy. I have thought about this for a long time—since last July—and I think we can guess why that is: talking about eating disorders inevitably challenges us to talk about mental health services in this country, and of course, the Government are not keen to do that, as it would offer a reckoning of their leadership in this area over the previous decade. Access to high-quality mental health services of all kinds is too rare. People wait too long and the oft-repeated promises about a parity of esteem approach have not led to meaningful action. That gets worse when we talk about child and adolescent mental health services. The evidence is irrefutable that the root of challenging behaviours around food is at that time in life, but, as every right hon. and hon. Member knows, trying to get a young constituent into CAMHS treatment is simply too hard. We are failing a big and growing part of our population by not addressing that, too, so in that sense the strategy has missed a really important opportunity.

I turn to public health. As I say, I am glad that these proposals have been brought forward. It has to be said, though, that they follow a decade of the Government's cutting services that improve the public's health. I know that it is a core strategy of the current Administration to act as a new Government and run as far away as possible from their record over the last 11 years—I would want to do that if I were them—but they cannot do so.

The public health grant, even with the recent uplift relating to covid, is nearly a quarter lower in real terms than it was five years ago. I had responsibility for the public health grant in Nottingham for three years prior to entering this place. My experience was that, with the growing pressures for demand-driven services such as drug and alcohol services and sexual health services, added to the consistent cuts to local authorities, there just was not anything left for longer-term services such as those that deal with healthy weight. That has meant a withering of nutrition guidance, shared cooking programmes and specialist support. That has absolutely weakened our approach to taking healthy weight issues head-on in this country. These proposals should have included a commitment to reversing those cuts and, frankly, some humility for having imposed them in the first place. That point needs addressing.

Of course—I will make this my final point—this is an issue about poverty in this country, too. If we eradicated much of the poverty, we would take a lot of the obesity with it. As I said, there is compelling evidence that obesity is much worse in poorer communities. Again, that makes it all the more mystifying that those massive and ongoing cuts to local authorities have been targeted at the poorest communities, especially in the big cities. That is an extraordinary public policy disconnect and, again, it is something that we ought to address in the strategy if we really want an all-services approach, at all levels of government, to taking on this national issue.

This is a very important issue and it is right that the Government are seeking to act. We will support them to move at pace to implement evidence-based, effective interventions, but we will push them, too, to close the gaps in the strategy so that it becomes genuinely transformative. The stakes here are lofty, so our ambitions must be lofty too.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): We will go, via video link, to Andrew Selous. Andrew, I have some great news for you; we have a bit more wiggle room, so you have four minutes.

3.26 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con) [V]: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Although we should always talk about obesity with sensitivity and avoid stigma at all costs, we lack courage and fail in our duty if we do not address it. Fundamentally, it is about life chances and social justice, and we want life, and life to the full, for all our constituents.

We are regularly asked to do more for the NHS, and rightly so. One crucial way we can help the NHS is to focus on the prevention of obesity. The 2019 paper by S. C. Davies produced by the Department of Health and Social Care calculated the medical cost and lost productivity cost of obesity at around 3% of gross domestic product, or £60 billion. As a country, we have the worst rates of obesity in Europe. There is absolutely no doubt that this matter is urgent and needs action now.

I salute the young people of Bite Back 2030, with their #AdEnough campaign, for their stand against the 15 billion junk food adverts they are bombarded with online every year. One young man told us he had more of those than he had contact from his grandmother. It is excellent that the Government are taking action on

that. We should also curtail junk food advertising on radio, outdoors and in cinemas, restrict junk food sponsorship of sports events and teams, and remove child-friendly characters from junk food packaging.

There is, I am afraid, quite a lot more work to do on reformulation. The 20% reduction target is far from being achieved by this autumn, with only 3% achieved so far. I congratulate Tesco, Asda, Weetabix, Co-op and Aldi on big reductions either overall or in some categories. By contrast, Mondelēz International and Mars Wrigley saw the sales weighted average of sugar per 100g in their sweet confectionery increase. They need to get with the programme. We need to start flooding our supermarkets, schools and the out-of-home sector with healthy, nutritious, delicious and hopefully often home-grown food, and we need to make sure that healthy food is affordable; as the Food Foundation has pointed out, this is often the case in Europe but, bizarrely, not always the case in the United Kingdom. That is something we should concentrate on and we can change, and we need to take it very seriously indeed.

It has always mystified me that the quality and outcomes framework in primary care does not reward GPs for collecting data on children's body mass index and ensuring there is a first-class diet, exercise and cooking skills offer online and in person locally. Primary care must be at the front of this campaign to make sure we are a nation of people with healthy weights.

Bite Back 2030 says that 60% of schools are not upholding school food standards even though it is the law to uphold them. We must strengthen the enforcement mechanism to make that happen, as school food is a great child health opportunity that we are not making the most of and that we need to act on urgently.

3.30 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP) [V]: I want to start by echoing the sentiments of the Obesity Health Alliance; in this debate, weight stigma does not help people lose weight. The right support, evidence-based weight management, and fundamental changes to our obesogenic environment and food systems are all required to tackle this.

The health harms caused by obesity are well known, but I initially wish to mention one particular aspect that does not get the attention it deserves: liver disease. On average 40 people die of liver disease every day. The Foundation for Liver Research and the British Liver Trust have sent a helpful briefing, but in truth I had already committed to mentioning it in this debate. My husband, Joe, was diagnosed with stage 2 non-alcohol related fatty liver disease in 2019, after wandering around complaining of a wee pain under his ribs for five years. Since his diagnosis, he has made difficult but necessary changes to his lifestyle; he has lost 22 kg, taken up hillwalking, and has been carefully monitoring his weight, and I am very proud of him.

Some 90% of liver disease is preventable and, luckily for Joe, at stage 2 it can be reversed; however, as it can remain asymptomatic for up to 20 years, three quarters of people are diagnosed at a late stage when it is too late for lifestyle changes or interventions. Liver disease is the third leading cause of premature death in the UK, with deaths increasing by 400% over the past two generations; this is in stark contrast to other major

[Alison Thewliss]

diseases, such as heart disease and cancer, so I urge the UK Government, who have acknowledged liver disease in their obesity plan, to come up with actions, including doing all they can to spread information about this disease and the ways of preventing it.

The disproportionate harm caused by covid-19 to older people, minority ethnic groups, the people living in greatest deprivation, and those with obesity, diabetes and respiratory and cardiovascular disease has highlighted new vulnerabilities and underscored existing health inequalities. While much focus has been put on the direct health impacts of covid, the SNP recognises that we must also work to shift our focus towards reducing those inequalities and preventing ill health. We want everyone to eat well, be a healthy weight and have equal access to care.

The ambitious and wide-ranging actions to address this challenge are set out in the Scottish Government's diet and healthy weight delivery plan. The plan, which has over 60 broad-ranging actions, has a strong focus on prevention, including population-level measures to make it easier for people to make healthier choices, as well as more targeted interventions. Alongside this, the SNP Scottish Government also published "A More Active Scotland: Scotland's Physical Activity Delivery Plan". This recognises the importance of physical activity in promoting and maintaining healthy weight. Progress towards the outcomes set out in this delivery plan is being monitored through a dedicated set of indicators linked to the active Scotland outcomes framework". The SNP Scottish Government are continuing to provide £1.7 million in 2020-21 for improvements to weight management services for children and young people. Earlier this year, the SNP Scottish Government also published the refresh of their diabetes improvement plan, which strengthens the actions in the original plan to improve the prevention and treatment of diabetes and the care of all people in Scotland affected by it.

The SNP has consistently pressed the UK Government to ban junk food advertising on television and online before the 9 pm watershed, and we welcome that this is finally coming to fruition. Online adverts on social media are an area the UK Government must tackle strongly, as other Members have mentioned, because they are pervasive. In our recent manifesto, the SNP renewed its commitment to halve childhood obesity by 2030 and to significantly reduce diet-related health inequalities by pledging to provide free school breakfasts and lunches to every primary school pupil in Scotland, all year round, and to all children in state-funded special schools in Scotland; and to pilot the provision of free nutritious school breakfasts in secondary schools and explore the feasibility of universal breakfast provision in secondary schools.

We also want to make Active Schools programmes free for all children by the end of the Parliament, continue to improve nutritional standards of food and drink in schools, and bring forward legislation over the next Parliament to restrict the use of promotions on food and drink that is high in fat, sugar and salt. We will also aim to enshrine the fundamental right to food in law, as the cornerstone of being a good food nation. That will form part of the commitment to incorporate UN human rights charters into Scots law.

Scotland has one of the world's best natural larders, but we know that so many people do not eat well and that obesity remains a significant problem. Evidence shows that in less well-off communities it is more difficult to obtain good-quality, fresh food at a price people can afford. Community larder projects, such as the Govanhill People's Pantry in my constituency, have been springing up all over the place and working hard to try to redress the balance, in this case by working with FareShare to provide access to food in the community.

The overriding issue of poverty is, of course, key to tackling a lot of the issues; access to sufficient healthy food and the means to cook it is not there for everyone, not least because of policies such as the two-child limit, the upcoming removal of the £20 uplift to universal credit and tax credits, the UK Government's neglect of people on legacy benefits, and the pretend living wage. They all contribute to a situation where people cannot afford to eat healthily. If the UK Government want to tackle obesity, they cannot continue to ignore this reality.

Investment in regenerating neighbourhoods, increasing access to walking and cycling, and improving parks is also significant in getting people out and about and moving. Just last night, alongside local councillors, I met mums and grans from the Calton Community Association, who are desperate to access the newly announced Scottish Government fund for parks so that their kids can benefit from outdoor play. An obesogenic environment, coupled with a culture that allows the insidious influence of food giants and their ultra-processed foods to be advertised not just to us but to our children, has proven to be a recipe for disaster. I am looking forward to watching the latest programme by campaigner Dr Chris van Tulleken, "What Are We Feeding Our Kids?" and urge the UK Government to tune in tonight. The supermarket aisles are heaving with unnecessary infant snack foods, and the new report by the First Steps Nutrition Trust should be essential reading for the Minister.

One significant point of difference in the UK and Scottish strategies concerns our youngest citizens. Scotland's healthy weight strategy specifically mentions the significance of breastfeeding, which can of course have a positive effect on maternal weight, as well as that of babies. The UK Government are committed to consulting

"on our proposals to help parents of young children to make healthier choices through more honest marketing and labelling of infant foods."

Ministers could start by doing more to protect babies and pregnant mothers from the rapacious global formula industry, and, in this the 40th year of the World Health Organisation's international code of marketing of breast milk substitutes, fully adopt the code. That used to be something the UK Government would blame the EU for their inability to do, but they have lost that excuse and must now act. The code sets out to protect all babies, however they are fed. As the chair of the all-party group on infant feeding and inequalities, I do not set this up as any kind of false pro-breastfeeding/anti-formula battle, because I know that for many formula is essential. Many mums want to breastfeed, but are failed by a UK Government who do not see breastfeeding as a priority and do not invest in support. Some years ago, Norway changed its approach and it now has one of the highest rates in the world. Norwegian mums do not have different breasts from us, but they do have a Government who made their needs a priority.

The Minister said that if adverts did not influence people, they would not be used, and she is correct. Formula companies spend astronomical figures on marketing, a cost that gets passed on to consumers at the tills and makes it challenging for many families to afford formula, and on the promotion of follow-on and specialist formulas, which are not necessary, but exist largely as a means of cross-promotion. I hope the UK Government will also act on that, as they claim they intend to look at honest marketing and labelling. As an example of that marketing, I share the concerns raised by the UK's Baby Feeding Law Group that the National Trust has formed a partnership with HiPP Organic, a company with many documented violations of the code over the years. We should be under no illusions: these kinds of partnerships exist to benefit the company and boost their brand, and I urge the National Trust to reconsider.

I wish to touch briefly on the issue of calories on menus, on which I have received many emails, as I am sure other Members have. I can see what the UK Government intend, and I appreciate that for some people having calories listed on menus may be useful—I have certainly eaten fewer Danish pastries since coffee shops started to put calories on the display—but the policy is not about anecdotes and headlines and must be based on evidence. For those with a history of disordered eating, this is a deeply serious issue and such triggers can be very harmful indeed, so I urge Ministers to be cautious in what they are doing and to listen to and learn from the evidence from expert organisations such as Beat and from those affected.

I commend the Government for taking action on a range of issues to do with obesity but urge them to look more widely at the factors that cause obesity and to follow the Scottish Government's approach with a healthy weight strategy.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call Greg Smith, with a four-minute limit.

3.40 pm

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): Obesity is clearly a huge challenge facing our country, and one that absolutely should not be ignored, but I do fear that the state is significantly overreaching in some of the proposals that have come forward as part of the obesity strategy. The approach to foods high in fat, sugar and salt encompasses a perversely broad range of products, including butter, granola, porridge oats, muesli and protein bars, none of which have any particular appeal to or indeed are marketed to children, yet all of which are treated as junk food.

Breakfast cereals were previously heralded for high fibre but are now demonised. No distinction is made for naturally occurring sugars and fats from the dried fruits and nuts that are so often present in those products. If the state is really saying that breakfast cereals are bad, where does that naturally push people? A bacon sandwich? A full English? A pain au chocolat? All are things that I am particularly partial to but that I do not think the public health establishment will be keen to endorse. Perhaps people could have toast? But then we see that butter is on the HFSS naughty list.

Many breakfast cereal producers pay farmers, including in my constituency, a premium for buying their oats, thereby paying for the environmental and wildlife schemes that I am sure we all value. Let us be in no doubt that

any policy that reduces cereal-makers' ability to sell wholegrain cereals will adversely impact on great British farmers.

Mr Harper: I was intrigued to listen to my hon. Friend's list of products. Is not the issue that there is a focus on individual products when, actually, the important thing in getting to a healthy weight is not individual products but a person's diet as a whole and the balance between individual products across their diet? To demonise individual products is not the way to go.

Greg Smith: I absolutely endorse and agree with everything that my right hon. Friend says. It must be about the promotion of a balanced, healthy diet. Some of the things that we all know are not particularly good for us can be part of that balanced, healthy diet, so I absolutely agree.

The restrictions also undermine some alternatives to high-sugar sacks. For example, protein bars are used by many adults who lead highly active lifestyles. Surely the restriction contradicts the ultimate goal of the Government's strategy: healthier living.

Let me move on briefly to the question of TV advertising. Broadcasters and creative industries throughout the United Kingdom are estimated to be in line to lose some £200 million because of the proposals. With children spending far more time watching online content than traditional TV channels, it is essential, not least for our public service broadcasters, that there is an absolutely clear level playing field between TV broadcast and online. Anything less would be to let down our broadcasters, particularly, as I say, our public service broadcasters.

I would also argue that the 9 pm watershed is equally destined to fail, as research shows that it will lower the calorie intake among children by just 1.7 calories a day, which is simply inconsequential. We need a more proportionate, less interventionist solution that ensures fairness for all. Obesity is a complex problem, but the solution cannot be nanny-ing, ineffective policies.

I certainly did not get into politics to tell people what they should and should not eat, because when people are free to make an informed choice about the way they live, without coercion or state interference, they are much more likely to keep those changes long term, to the benefit of the health of the nation. I urge the Government to rethink the proposals and strip out the nonsensical inclusion of products such as cereals and protein bars. Let us look once more to freedom, choice and personal responsibility.

3.45 pm

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab) [V]: The Government are clearly right to say that this is one of the greatest long-term health challenges that we face, and it starts with our children. One in four enter primary school overweight or obese and, as the Minister pointed out, one in three leave in that position six years later. We have a shocking problem that gets worse during children's primary years.

Like any disease, there are two ways of tackling it: prevention and treatment. I broadly welcome the measures being proposed by the Government on prevention, although we should look carefully at the evidence and concerns around calorie labelling for those with eating disorders, but prevention is not enough in itself. We need proper treatment services for children, and currently we do not have them.

[Paul Blomfield]

Imagine for a moment that we were talking about another disease—say, cancer. Would we say, “We’ll invest in prevention, but I’m afraid we’ll not offer any treatment for children with the disease.” Of course we would not, but that is what we are saying for obesity currently. The Health and Social Care Committee highlighted the problem in its 2018 report, noting evidence from Public Health England that only 56% of local authorities

“have a tier 2 weight management service for children”

and that those services

“are not intended to support individuals with complex needs. When looking at tier 3 and 4 services, service provision is bare.”

It went on to recommend:

“The Government must ensure there are robust systems in place not only to identify children who are overweight or obese, but to ensure that these children are offered effective help through a multidisciplinary, family-centric approach.”

However, the Government’s obesity strategy does not acknowledge the issue. I have become aware of it through the work that I have done with Shine Health Academy in my constituency—a great local project providing the sort of tier 3 services that the Committee wanted. They take children on referral from GPs, teachers and social workers, and they have great outcomes, but they are funded mainly by charities, because neither clinical commissioning groups nor local authorities have responsibility for commissioning services.

I know that the Minister recognises the problem because, together with the inspirational leader of Shine Health Academy Kath Sharman, I met her to discuss the issue about 18 months ago. There have been some positive initiatives by NHS England, and I welcome the work to establish complications related to excess weight clinics—CREW clinics—to support children and young people with severe obesity, but it is limited. As I understand it, the aim of such services is to manage the comorbidities associated with obesity rather than tackling the disease itself. There are just seven centres in the plan, each for 100 children. It is useful, but it is a very small step assessed against need, because the Obesity Health Alliance calculates that there are 450,000 children in the UK who, if they were adults, would be eligible for bariatric surgery. That is shocking, but it is the scale of the challenge.

There are also worries about the CREW approach. Such clinics seem to place too much emphasis on the role of hospitals, and risk being about medical management rather than weight management. They definitely have a role to play and are fundamental to the treatment of comorbidities, but they should not be the only model of care. Above all, there is no certainty of future funding. In her summing up, I ask the Minister, who I know cares about this issue, to say whether it will finally be the Government’s intention to establish clear responsibility for commissioning tier 3 services for children as the Health and Social Care Committee recommended, because frankly nothing less will do.

3.49 pm

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): Thank you for inviting me to contribute to this extremely important debate, Mr Deputy Speaker. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) for securing the debate, and to the way in which the Minister and the Opposition spokesman have contributed so far. Obesity rates are too high, without

question, and the long-term consequences include a range of diseases: covid, which has already been mentioned, dementia, cancer, diabetes, heart disease, liver disease and so many more. The need to tackle obesity therefore goes without saying.

The challenge of obesity and its consequences among young children naturally has a very long tail. Introducing policies to meet the childhood obesity challenge naturally requires an understanding of the complexity of the causes if we are to have a real impact on the effect. Diet is obviously central to what we need influence, but it is not the full story. Contributing to the make-up of the diet there will be a series of complexities, and there needs to be clarity around the content of food products. I pay tribute to the work that the Government are doing and what they have committed to do in the Queen’s Speech, and to the work that has been done on labelling and on the sugar tax, which has contributed to a reduction in sugar in fizzy drinks and other products.

Knowledge and skills are important, including, for example, on the availability of fresh vegetables. Fruit and vegetables are obviously important, as is knowing how to cook. Standards and approaches in schools are also difficult. We need education in schools and among parents, who are also central to tackling childhood obesity. Lifestyle is an issue. The slower lifestyle through the lockdown period has enabled many people to address their own weight, but others have not done so. All of these issues naturally have complexities associated with them. Exercise is clearly also an issue, as well as eating disorders, which have been highlighted. I am trying to highlight the complexity of all that we need to face.

With these points in mind, I ask the Minister to consider the cause and effect directly, as well as the focus that has been given to the advertising industry and the marketing of food products, to establish whether it will have the desired impact. Whatever action we take, we must be sure that it will make a difference. There have been calls for many years for a television advertising ban. I can remember it being discussed in Cabinet and being resisted because the evidence was unconvincing. We need to consider that, although there is a call for a television advertising ban, habits have changed. Very few children these days watch television in the way that we might have done when we were younger, and that demonstrates the further complexity of the debate. Displacement is another issue. Advertising is more likely to move online, and I think all Governments recognise the challenge of tackling advertising online. Finding a solution is much more complicated when dealing with things online, as we have seen from the example of Governments struggling to tackle adult content online being accessed by children.

In the very limited time I have, I want to ask the Minister to look at the consequences, both positive and negative, and to question whether one will outweigh the other. I ask her to engage with the industry to see whether a solution can be found in which the industry itself, including broadcasters and online advertisers, can support the Government’s aims.

3.54 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I speak today as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on eating disorders and I want to highlight the anxiety felt by many of those with an eating disorder about one specific aspect of the obesity strategy: calorie labelling on menus.

Obesity causes serious health problems and there is no doubt that far too many people in this country do not have a healthy weight. I add my unequivocal support to the Government's aim of addressing obesity, but obesity has to be considered as one side of our complex relationship with food. It is a form of disordered eating and therefore cannot be separated from other forms of disordered eating and cannot be dealt with in isolation. Calorie labelling on menus will not only be ineffective in tackling obesity, but will actively damage those with an eating disorder.

Studies show that there is only a small body of low-quality evidence supporting the suggestion that calorie counts on menus lead to a reduction in calories purchased. While there is limited evidence that calorie labelling will support the public in losing weight, there is convincing evidence that it would harm people with an eating disorder. About 1.25 million people in the UK have an eating disorder, and the 2019 health survey found that 16% of all adults aged 16 or over screened positive for a possible eating disorder. Over the pandemic, the charity Beat has reported a 173% increase in demand for eating disorder support, and research shows that individuals with anorexia and bulimia are more likely to order food with significantly fewer calories when presented with a menu including calorie counts. Those with binge eating disorder are more likely to order food with significantly more calories.

Many people with eating disorders also live with obesity. Up to 30% of people seeking weight management services would meet the diagnostic criteria for binge eating disorder. Clearly, a reductionist approach to nutrition means that the obesity strategy risks harming some of the very people it is designed to support.

Mr Harper: I am sympathetic to the point the hon. Lady is making, and she will know from my intervention that I think the evidence with respect to calories and out-of-home labelling is quite weak. Is labelling on products purchased in supermarkets also a problem for those with eating disorders? I ask that genuinely; I do not know the answer. Can she furnish that information?

Wera Hobhouse: I am particularly concerned about calorie labelling in restaurants. People who suffer from eating disorders are isolated and fearful of contact with others because they are thinking continuously about what they are going to eat or drink. Going out to a restaurant gets them through that step, and it is often a significant step towards recovery. As I say, my particular concern is labelling on restaurant menus.

In response to the survey on calorie labelling conducted by Beat, one respondent said:

"My eating disorder thrives off calorie counting and knowing all the calories in everything. I would feel compelled to look at calorie labels"

in restaurants and

"I would feel embarrassed asking for a different menu. Please don't do it. Please."

The Mental Health Minister has been extremely generous with her time, listening to the all-party parliamentary group's concerns about the plan to mandate calorie labelling on menus. The APPG is grateful for her interest in improving early access to eating disorder treatment. However, I must repeat my plea to the Government to look again at this element of the obesity strategy.

Addressing obesity and tackling eating disorders should not be in competition. We must tackle them together. I look forward to working with the Minister to develop an obesity strategy that successfully addresses the obesity epidemic, but does not harm people with other forms of eating disorder.

3.58 pm

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): As I said in my interventions on the Minister, I very much support the Government's objective. A situation in which 36% of adults in England are overweight and 28% are obese is not good, and there are many health consequences of it, but my view is that, fundamentally, we need, first, to enable people to understand whether they are overweight or obese. That might sound like a foolish thing to say, but there is some evidence that people do not recognise whether they or those around them are overweight or obese, and are not very good at working that out.

Secondly, we need to make people understand the health consequences of being overweight or obese. The Minister talked about incentives. The real incentive that people should have is that they want to be healthier. Unless individuals themselves want to be healthier and move towards a healthy weight, it seems to me that we will not get very far.

Frankly, getting to a healthy weight means having a healthy diet. It does not mean going on a diet and then going back to unhealthy eating; it means changing diet permanently. In many cases, it means making not dramatic changes but small changes that people stick to, such as reducing portion sizes. It is about reducing treats and things we like, not getting rid of them. When I eat, I like all the bad things, but I have become better as I have got older—I have needed to—and now I am a bit more controlled about how many times I have them. I watch the size of my portions, because as I have got older, I have had to watch what I eat.

It seems to me that it is about diet, not about individual foods. As my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith) said, demonising individual foods is not a very successful strategy. There are plenty of things that I like that would individually be very unhealthy, but I just do not eat them very often. That is where we need to get to: people need to understand what a healthy weight is, understand the health consequences and want to get there themselves.

I have a couple of questions for the Minister. She spoke about the evidence for out-of-home labelling. The impact assessment is a rather weighty document of 76 pages, but one of the things that I learned as a Minister is that it is worth plodding through such documents. There is lots of useful information in it, but I did not find any compelling evidence that introducing out-of-home calorie labelling would have any significant impact on the quantity of calories that people consume. Given the concerns that the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) and the charity Beat have rightly set out about those with eating disorders, the case for its successful impact is not very compelling. There is quite a lot of concern that it will not be helpful, so I think the Government ought to think again about their approach.

I also have a question about the soft drinks industry levy. The levy has been successful in reducing the amount of sugar consumed; in my constituency, Suntory Beverage & Food Great Britain and Ireland, which produces

[Mr Mark Harper]

Lucozade, Ribena and Orangina, has led the industry in taking more than 50% of sugar out of its products. It has also invested £13 million in new machinery at its Forest of Dean plant to produce those products—I was very proud to launch the new production line. However, although we have reduced the amount of sugar consumed, I have seen no evidence that we have therefore reduced the quantity of calories consumed or made any impact as a result.

Alun Cairns: My right hon. Friend is making a very effective, cogent argument. Does he agree that because there is a will to come up with a solution that will have an impact, there is a danger that unless we take account of all the evidence, including his points about the impact of the sugar tax, we might well feel better for doing something, but not quite achieve what we set out to achieve?

Mr Harper: That is right. I am very keen that we look at the evidence. I can see that through reformulation we have led the industry—the company that makes Lucozade and Ribena has been successful in doing that—but the real question is whether that has reduced the number of calories consumed, both by adults and by children, and had any impact on the number of people who are overweight or obese. It has clearly been successful in reducing the quantity of sugar consumed, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham said, sugar in itself is not a bad thing; people need to consume a certain amount of sugar to have a healthy diet. My worry is that we have reduced the amount of sugar in these products, but that will not actually make any difference to whether people have a healthy diet.

All these measures need to be tested. The point that I was making to the Minister earlier is that I do not want us to introduce them, wait nine years until 2030, and then say, “Goodness, it hasn’t worked.” I absolutely accept the Minister’s point that national targets may not make sense, but we need to look, at a local level, at whether the measures are successful. If they are not working, we need to change them and look at what the evidence suggests would be more successful in getting people to a healthy weight so that we all lead a healthier lifestyle.

4.3 pm

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, which is covering a wide range of issues. At its heart, it is about trying to support a healthier British public, which I think the whole House genuinely cares about.

My reason for speaking in the debate relates to alcohol labelling; I am sure that the Minister remembers our recent Adjournment debate. We are in the incredible situation where a product such as non-alcoholic beer or wine may provide its calorie content, nutritional information and a lot more, but an alcoholic product need contain only three pieces of information by law: the allergens, the percentage of alcohol by volume and the amount of liquid in the container. That is quite a bizarre situation for us to be in, so I am pleased to hear that the Minister is pushing ahead with the consultation on alcohol labelling. There has been some confusion in recent weeks and months. Just a few weeks ago, we heard that the Government had ditched plans to force pubs to list calories as part of

a drive to tackle obesity. That came from Downing Street. I hope that, given what the Minister said, the consultation will be kicking off some time soon.

I want to push the Minister once more on the need for a national alcohol strategy. We had the highest rate of deaths from alcohol on record this year. Alcohol-specific deaths are at an all-time high at a moment when drug and alcohol services are underfunded and mental health services are overstretched.

If this is all about supporting a healthier nation—we have the obesity strategy, Dame Carol Black’s review of drugs, a consultation on alcohol labelling, a review of the Gambling Act 2005, and a promised addiction strategy from 2019—I suggest to the Minister that that work needs to be pulled together. The issues that we have touched on in this debate, including mental health and poverty, which are drivers of addiction, really need to be focused on in the months and years ahead.

4.6 pm

Mr Jonathan Lord (Woking) (Con) [V]: While I welcome many aspects of the Government’s obesity strategy, today I want to argue against the Government’s outlined proposals to restrict TV and online advertising for high-fat, high-sugar and high-salt foods.

These proposals are blunt tools that will have little or no impact on obesity. The Government assess that both the TV watershed ban and the full online ban will lead to just a 4.5 daily calorie reduction among overweight children. That is completely inconsequential compared with initiatives such as The Daily Mile or Couch to 5K, which have the potential to increase calorific expenditure by about 100 calories a day, or targeted, community-based approaches, such as the Health, Exercise, Nutrition for the Really Young—HENRY—programme in Leeds or the Three Area Project in Wakefield. Those two programmes are based on a holistic approach. They address education, activity levels and food inequality, and have had measurable success.

Commentators might argue that the proposed bans do not matter, but they have large adverse impacts on broadcasters, online news media, advertising and production companies, food and drink companies, retailers and the hospitality sector. Advertisers have made it clear that this ad spend and investment will not be rerouted back through other channels but could leave the UK market altogether. The bans will reduce the advertising revenue that media reinvest in programming and content. They will prevent food and retail companies and the hospitality trade from communicating with their customers. They will impact jobs and remove most incentives food manufacturers have to invest in healthier alternatives in this market, because the alternatives themselves may still fall within scope.

The Quebec ban on advertising to children, introduced as long ago as 1980—incidentally, for reasons other than to tackle obesity—had no effect on childhood obesity rates in that province, compared with other provinces. Indeed, the prevalence of being overweight or obese among children in Quebec grew by 140% during the first 15 full years of the advertising ban—a faster increase than elsewhere in Canada, where those restrictions did not exist.

The UK’s advertising restrictions, currently in place across broadcast and non-broadcast advertising, including online advertising, are already among the strictest in the

world. They restrict the exposure of HFSS advertising to children under 16. Although TV restrictions have been in place since 2008 and have reduced child exposure to HFSS on TV by around 70%, this has made no measurable impact on obesity rates. These current plans are disproportionate and not evidence-based; they are not targeted at the problem that the Government say needs to be addressed, which is to protect children. Indeed, they are sweeping and comprehensive, requiring new laws and a new regulatory structure.

I urge the Government to liaise much better with industry. The Committee on Advertising Practice, the advertising code body, has put to Ministers an alternative proposal to this online ad ban, which is targeted, workable, effective and enforceable. So, let us do that. Let us engage rather than have these damaging and over-the-top regulatory proposals.

4.11 pm

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab) [V]: Like almost everyone speaking in the debate today, I support measures to ensure that people have a healthy relationship with the food that they eat. However, healthy eating habits cannot simply be measured on weighing scales or counted in calories. Today, we are facing a mental health crisis, one element of which is the rising epidemic of eating disorders, including obesity.

I fear that our strategy falls well short of the social and mental health support needed to help people manage a healthy relationship with food. I am talking about those who have any conditions relating to weight management, whether that is diabetes or heart disease, or an eating disorder. I hope that the new funding for services will see those approaches supported.

While I am fully supportive of interventions such as restrictions on advertising and work to improve the diet of the nation, I remain very concerned about certain aspects of the strategy. Before the pandemic, hospital admissions were increasing, especially among teenagers. In 2019-20, we saw a sharp 32% increase on the previous year to more than 21,000 cases, nearly 5,000 of which were children. In addition to hospital admissions between February 2020 and January 2021, the eating disorder charity Beat reported a massive 173% surge in demand for its services. During that time, we saw no corresponding rise in the levels of funding going to eating disorder services. I have sat with eating disorder specialists who have told me that the money that is available often fails to get to the frontline. One doctor I spoke to said that his service was originally designed for 60 children, but now serves 280, with inadequate funding for those places.

I know that NHS trusts are also struggling with non-specialist in-patient services for children. The rising demand means that they just do not have the expertise available to treat in-patients with eating disorders properly, with many waiting for urgent beds for children in crisis in any specialist unit anywhere in the country. We still see a situation in adult services where there are no waiting time targets for support for eating disorders.

I am highlighting this dire situation because one measure of the Government's obesity strategy involves calorie labelling on menus. Among those who will be reading those menus will be people with eating disorders. There is a wealth of research that shows that calorie labelling can exacerbate unhealthy relationships with food and can be a predictor of the onset of eating

disorders. In trying to fix one problem, there is a real danger that Ministers will make another far worse, the costs of which are not trivial. Eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of any mental health problem, and people who suffer from them are at increased risk of suicide and self-harm. While it is true that half of those with eating disorders recover, 20% remain in a chronic condition.

We should look at obesity in the round. Balanced nutritious meals, promoting healthy diets such as Mediterranean diets, and healthy levels of exercise are far more important ways of maintaining a healthy weight. I urge the Government to rethink and revisit that aspect of the plan, come up with a solution that balances the needs of all. If we really want to promote healthy eating habits, calories on menus are not necessarily the way to do it for the whole population and risk making a very bad situation even worse for those suffering from or at risk of developing eating disorders. I say this as someone with type 2 diabetes. I have lost weight in order to manage my diabetes. There is a real issue with anxiety around calories and weighing out food. More needs to be done to recognise these anxieties and mental health issues.

4.15 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am grateful to be able to speak on this matter. It has been an ongoing issue for the United Kingdom and I appreciate that it is one of our greatest health challenges that affects people of all ages. I want to put on record my thanks to the Minister. I have been involved in many debates where she has responded on the issue of diabetes, which I think she referred to in her introduction. I believe that she is totally committed to bringing together a strategy that we can all endorse and will hopefully bring about a healthier and leaner United Kingdom. I also welcome the commitment to the alcohol strategy.

I am a type 2 diabetic and I have had diabetes for approximately 14 years. I am proud to say that since being diagnosed I have lost almost four stone on what I weighed back in 2008 and 2009. I am not proud of the circumstances that got to me to where I was. I did not even know what diabetes was, to be truthful. I was not even sure what the symptoms were until I met a diabetic maybe the year before. The choices that led me to be diagnosed with type 2 diabetes were ill-judged. I never really gave thought to the health issues that can come along with the foods I was eating. Sweet-and-sour pork and two bottles of Coca-Cola six nights week are not a good thing for anyone, and they certainly were not good for me, as I found out for the worse.

I am now confident and well pleased with how I deal with the issue. It takes self-control. The right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) referred to self-control, which is very important. Not everybody can do it, but if they can, it is good that they can. Along with the tablets that I take for the diabetes, it seems to be bringing results. There is no place in society for judgment when it comes to the topic of obesity, as the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) said.

Mr Harper: I cannot remember whether I said—as I should have done, when I was talking about people being disciplined—that I accept that it is a simple thing in one sense to reduce one's calorie intake and take more exercise, but it is not easy for people to do. I did

[Mr Harper]

not want to indicate, if I had left that impression, that I thought it was easy. Equally, while there is no alternative, ultimately, to people taking responsibility themselves, I accept that many people require help and support to do so. I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has given me the opportunity to put that on the record

Jim Shannon: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for clarifying the matter. I knew that is what he meant, but I thank him.

The health survey for England refers to 1,000 people aged over 16, 277 of whom were obese and 31 were morbidly obese. In Northern Ireland, the figures are replicated; in fact, they are the same everywhere. Childhood obesity is a crucial issue on which much more needs to be done to make youths feel less self-conscious about the issue but at the same time able to do something about it. Obesity affects one in every five children in Northern Ireland. The figures there unfortunately show that there are outstanding problems to be addressed. Obesity exaggerates high blood pressure, diabetes and liver disease. Obesity is one of the three main causes of liver disease, in particular. Obesity also affects many other things, as the Minister said. It is very important to put that on record.

I have met constituents of mine over the years who had a medical condition that meant that they were not obese by choice but because of the circumstances of their own individual bodies. The people I am referring to had to go for bariatric surgery. I know some people who did that and I know it changed their lives. Perhaps the Minister could comment on how such procedures can be looked after within the NHS, because to do it privately costs over £10,000.

This is a serious health problem and it affects thousands of people. I want people to live their lives healthily and happily. I believe children should be taught that support is all around them and that their size is nothing to be ashamed of. There are ways to go about detecting obesity. However, I feel that one of the most important factors in tackling this issue is to reassure people that they will not be judged. Judgment often leads to resentment and failure, and there is no doubt that it is a sensitive issue for those who struggle with weight loss. I therefore urge the Minister to take that into consideration. I also urge others to be kind when it comes to such a topic. I believe that help and support is there for all those who are obese and seek help. I sincerely hope that in the coming years we can work together to bring forward a strategy that will encourage people and not do them down.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Wind-ups begin at 4.44 pm. There are six speakers left. Hopefully, we will get you all in at four minutes. We will see.

4.20 pm

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) on securing the debate.

There is no doubt that tackling obesity is one of the greatest long-term health challenges this country faces. Weight loss is an incredibly difficult challenge for so

many people. I spent the first few months of this year on an enforced walking programme and managed to lose a stone in weight. Coming back to Westminster, I am afraid I can already feel it piling back on, but that personal responsibility that my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) talked about earlier is so critical.

One reason I wanted to speak in this debate is that children in the most deprived parts of the country are more than twice as likely to be obese as their peers who live in wealthier areas. That is sowing the seeds of adult disease and health inequalities in early childhood. We do need an urgent strategy so I welcome many of the measures the Minister talked about earlier.

I think we all agree on the need to address issues around obesity. How we tackle it is what we need to debate and what we are debating today. I heard the Minister say that there is no silver bullet and I think she is absolutely right on that. However, I am afraid there are some bullets that can have wide-ranging impacts, some of them unintended. As a number of hon. Friends have raised, one proposal is a TV and digital advertising ban. While some suggestions appear straightforward, I think this is a very complicated issue. The Minister herself said that if advertising did not work, the companies concerned wouldn't do it. She is absolutely right on that, but there is significant evidence to suggest that introducing a ban will not deliver the necessary beneficial impacts she wants and could have significant outcomes on the public good. The Government's own evidence, as we have heard, shows that the reductions in calorific intake will be negligible—about 1.7 calories a day. I think it was referred to earlier as a Smartie; I would refer to it as a Tic Tac. It really is not a significant amount of calories on a daily basis. My call to the Minister, therefore, is to encourage further investment in education in this area.

I want to mention in particular the impact that a reduction in advertising or an ad ban would have on public service broadcasters such as ITV and Channel 4. Some data I have seen suggests that about £200 million a year would be taken out of that sector, which is almost three times the amount the broadcaster spends on regional news each year. Regional news is something we all benefit from. It is incredibly important and the impact on public service broadcasting would be significant. My drive is to encourage broadcasters to put more emphasis on the campaigns they have been working on recently, such as the “Eat them to Defeat Them” campaign to increase the amount of vegetables in shopping baskets—around 500 million child-sized portions because of joined-up thinking between broadcasters and retailers, and something that children want to get involved with.

To conclude, one issue that has concerned me greatly relates to press reports suggesting that the ad ban will not be introduced across all platforms. It could be that it is just on TV platforms, rather than online platforms such as YouTube. That is a recipe for disaster, because the money currently spent on TV channels that generate wealth for this country will simply go overseas to the US.

4.24 pm

Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con) [V]: With more than half the adults in this country classed as overweight, which has well-known associated health impacts on society and the NHS, I understand why the

Government want to tackle this issue. Much of the strategy on public health education is not objectionable, unlike the proposals about the advertising of two-for-ones and where shops can display their wares, which I believe fall foul of the core Conservative principles, which are the reason I am in politics, of promoting freedom and the liberty of our citizens.

There is much evidence that suggests that such proposals will not work anyway and will be heavy-handed. That is why these ideas, thankfully, never came to fruition in two former Prime Ministers' Administrations. The legislation will essentially nationalise the content of food advertising, which will be chosen by the Department of Health and Social Care in Whitehall. It is redolent of EU regulations about whether Jaffa Cakes are biscuits or cakes and Harold Wilson's selective employment tax; instead we should trust citizens to make decisions for themselves and concentrate on education so that those choices are informed.

The proposed advertising ban on high-fat, salt and sugar products before 9 pm on TV and online in its entirety will not only catch those foods that we commonly think of as junk, but target foods such as ready-made sandwiches, butter and jam. Speciality businesses such as wedding cake shops or artisan producers of sausages will not be able to promote their products on the primary advertising mediums of the 21st century. We are a party that claims to stand behind business, but the financial impact across the food, advertising and broadcasting industries, in stifling entrepreneurship and competition, will be enormous. All these proposals, by the Government's own admission, will reduce children's calorie intake only by an unnoteworthy amount. Research from Mondelez International states that restricting promotions will lead to an average daily reduction of only 8 calories for adults.

An obesity strategy as a concept and one that empowers my constituents in Northampton South is fine, but proposals towards a nanny, banny state, which are contrary to years of the Prime Minister's own writings and to core Conservative principles, are not at all fine. They exemplify the politician's syllogism from the 1988 edition of "Yes, Prime Minister": "We have a problem. Something must be done. Well, here's something, so let's do that."

4.27 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): The challenge of obesity has of course been magnified by the last year's events, and the evidence is clear, as ever, about the importance of having a healthy lifestyle and eating well. I welcome the national food strategy's putting a better food system at the heart of the covid-19 recovery. It is worrying that one in three children who leave primary school is overweight and one in five is obese. It is crucial to rethink the food that young people are being given, and the right education is the key to the answer.

I recently met and had a great discussion with Ruth Hall, a constituent in Addingham and a former home economics teacher, about ensuring that people know how to prepare healthy food. She showed me her old lessons plans, which included guidance on making nutritious meals at an affordable price. The people she taught over her 36 years as a teacher were given the right skills to cook, and I am sure their children are better informed about healthier eating.

I worry that home economics as a subject for all at an early age in our schools is now lost, and I fear that a generation have now missed out on acquiring these skills, which I believe is a key reason for the worrying statistics I have mentioned. It is therefore vital for the Government to act to make sure that young people are equipped with the adequate training on and knowledge of nutrition and how to cook a decent meal—a decent, wholesome meal.

There is a much wider discussion to be had about where people's food comes from. I regularly speak to farmers and those working in the food production sector, who are frustrated by the lack of knowledge about that nationally in the wider population. It needs to be at the heart of our good food strategy. The Government's intentions to change how food is advertised, displayed and promoted in shops will undoubtedly create purchase behavioural change, but I am yet to be totally reassured of the absolute benefits that will have.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter) and the Minister have said, there is no silver bullet. However, of course, in this place we cannot ignore the fact that this issue disproportionately affects those in deprived communities. Currently, children in those communities are twice as likely to be obese than those in less deprived areas. That must be addressed. I am pleased that the Government have pledged to halve childhood obesity and close that gap by 2030, but our approach cannot just be Government-centred; communities must be key, active players, and parents must take more responsibility for what they feed their children and the consequences of that. Of course, that loops back to education.

I know that the NHS long-term plan has ring-fenced £4.5 billion to help local GPs, pharmacists and others deal with issues such as obesity, but I am sure that home economics, food nutrition, and teaching children and parents how to cook good, wholesome food will be a great start.

4.31 pm

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): As a member of the all-party parliamentary group on obesity and chair of the APPG on the national food strategy, I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this vital debate. We have heard many statistics this afternoon that underline the need for decisive and urgent action by the Government, so I will focus my comments on the complexity of the challenge and the need to tackle obesity with the same collective approach that we have seen work so well during the last year in response to covid-19.

I was pleased to see the importance of prevention acknowledged in the Queen's Speech, in the words:

"Measures will be brought forward to support the health and wellbeing of the nation, including to tackle obesity".—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 11 May 2021; Vol. 812, c. 1.]

I particularly welcome the introduction of the Office for Health Promotion, which acknowledges that our health is shaped by many factors and that the ability to make Healthy choices is not simply a matter of individual behaviour change. Regional and community variations in obesity are strongly linked to the structural inequalities that we seek to address through our levelling-up agenda. Poor diet affects our ability to achieve our full potential, so tackling obesity is central to our commitment to level up.

[Jo Gideon]

However, to improve the nation's health, we need to work together in the same way we did during the pandemic. From schools to local authorities, food producers, manufacturers and marketeers, health professionals and community groups, sports clubs, influencers, families and individuals, the battle to tackle obesity needs to be grasped by us all. That battle should not be framed as a war between the nanny state and personal freedom, as many more of our behaviours were during the pandemic, and I think that the majority of people acknowledge that.

I am reminded of a previous and ongoing health campaign, and the shift of public opinion, on the issue of smoking. I recall that it took many years and some Government legislation to alter the narrative significantly, even though the health risks associated with smoking have been widely known for decades. That is why I support, as part of a comprehensive approach to obesity prevention, the restriction of retail promotions on food and drinks high in fat, salt and sugar, the banning of junk food adverts on television before 9 pm, and a total ban online. Young people are particularly vulnerable to highly targeted online junk food advertising whenever they access social media.

If we are to see generational improvements in obesity levels, we must start with early years, so I welcome the recent increase in the Healthy Start payments made available to pregnant women and those with children under the age of four to help them buy fruit and vegetables, and the investment in school holiday clubs to ensure that many more children receive healthy food and exercise during the holidays.

Education has a vital part to play in behaviour change, with all schools offering healthy meals in their canteen and teaching about nutrition, underpinned by cooking skills for all. The latter must be measured as a key curriculum requirement, and the nutritional value of school meals needs to be included in Ofsted or local authority inspections to ensure that school food standards are met.

I also welcome the Government's commitment to a health incentives and reward approach and the use of innovative tools to effect behaviour change, as well as the plan to build on existing digital solutions available via GPs to widen access to digital dietary support programmes to those who wish to improve their health, rather than to the clinically obese only. This Government are committed to winning the battle against the nation's obesity crisis with a wide range of measures. It is a battle we cannot afford to lose.

4.35 pm

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) on securing this debate, and I welcome my hon. Friend the Minister to her place. It is clear with the breathless endorsements from the Opposition that the Government, if they wish, can fully get their way with these proposals, but I worry.

I worry that an opportunity for a determined and modern policy based on empowering individuals has instead been replaced with a rather tired, top-down, bureaucratic approach. I worry that the Department of Health and Social Care algorithm has resulted not in an

intelligent group of products, but a confusing and ill-targeted group of products, as my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith) said.

I worry that the policy is literally treating adults like children, particularly with its full-scale transfer of the nutrient profile model. Worse, I worry that the policy targets those who are poor, ethnic minorities and the elderly, who are most likely to be obese or overweight, and it connotes with it a rather condescending attitude that the Government know best for those particular groups of people.

I worry that the evidentiary base is flimsy. The Minister mentioned the sugar tax, and the sugar tax may have been successful, but that is not what is in this policy. In fact, the policy being proposed is very different from the sugar tax. I worry that success is not defined or measured. Essentially, the policy remains a matter of hope, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) pointed out.

I worry about the haste of implementation, adding new efforts and responsibilities on businesses just as they are recovering from the impact of lockdowns. In particular, I worry about the impact on Jordans in my constituency and the farmers who are supporting that business. I worry that the Department has chosen to silence the power of businesses and the power of their brands, rather than enhance them in the efforts they wish to undertake.

I worry that the policy is blunt where it could be smart. For example, it prefers an outright ban to using technologies in advertising online that would help achieve the Government's goals. I worry about the unintended consequences for people with eating disorders. I worry about timing. Many people are already anxious about their health post covid, and these measures will do nothing to avert those anxieties.

I worry about the social credit system of points that Sir Keith Mills may come up with in his review, with all of its potential ramifications. I worry where all this may lead—potentially we will have an NHS app. As we walk down the street and pass a restaurant or a bar, it will beep to tell us, "Please input what you have eaten." Perhaps we will reach there one day. In fact, we are already there. Those apps are already under trial by the NHS.

4.38 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Helping people to achieve and maintain a healthy weight is one of the most important things we can do to improve our nation's health. As a consultant paediatrician, I have seen at first hand a worrying rise in obesity among our children and the health complications that come with it. I remember in my practice seeing a nine-year-old heavier than I was at seven months pregnant. I saw a young teenager weighing more than 120 kg—that is more than 19 stone. I saw many children with significant obesity-related health problems.

As other Members have said, the trend is increasing. One in three children leaving primary school are already overweight and one in five are leaving with obesity. This trend is further exacerbated in the most deprived areas of this country, where children are twice as likely to be obese as their peers in the richest areas. This is tragically setting up far too many young people for a lifetime of health complications, from diabetes to mental health, as well as reinforcing health inequalities.

In my experience as a doctor, the patients I see want to maintain a healthy weight but find it challenging to do so—and it is challenging, perhaps not surprisingly given the food environment in which we live. In particular, eating out has gone from an occasional treat to a regular feature of our social lives, but we have very little information on how many calories are in the food offered. This is important because on average meals out contain more than twice as many calories as those prepared at home. Accordingly, I welcome the Government's proposal to introduce calorie labelling on menus, because it will empower people and give them the chance to make the healthy choices that they want to make. Nutritional information is already available on the food and drinks that we buy in supermarkets; expanding the practice to larger restaurants and cafés will help customers to make more informed decisions when they eat out. The evidence shows that calorie labelling on menus can reduce the number of calories consumed by about 8% and, indeed, that it leads to the development of healthier menus.

Although I welcome the push for reformulation to reduce the sugar and calorie content of food, I am worried that in their efforts to reduce the calories on menus, food producers and establishments may make greater use of artificial sweeteners. Research has shown that the mismatch between the sweet taste and few calories provided by artificial sweeteners can confuse the body's systems and lead to hunger cravings that result in the consumption of an even greater number of calories overall. We need to be careful to ensure that our efforts to reduce calories do not unintentionally create the opposite effect with artificial sweeteners.

Finally, I wish to discuss an area that needs greater emphasis in the Government's strategy to tackle obesity: education. As other Members have mentioned, education is really important in tackling obesity. Today's greater prevalence of eating out is partly because of an increase in disposable income and convenience. We also know that cooking skills at home are just not what they once were. Education has a significant part to play by instilling healthy habits in young people and showing them not just what is healthy but how to make it, so that by the time they leave school they have good kitchen-safety skills and can cook simple, healthy and nutritious meals. I hope that when she responds to the debate the Minister will have time to elaborate further on the Government's intentions in regard to education in this policy area.

4.42 pm

Alex Norris: With the leave of the House, I shall respond to the debate. The funny thing about opening and closing this debate for the Opposition is that I have already posed 10-minutes' worth of questions to the Minister and now I am back for another round. I do want to hear the answers to my questions and to the many good questions posed by Members from all parties, so I shall not speak for long. I am not sure whether that is a kindness to the Minister, but we are keen to hear the answers.

I want to reflect on some of the contributions, because it has been a really great debate. I hope that the people watching—there is a lot of interest in this subject—will have seen the quality of the discussions. There have of course been differences of view, but that is a good thing, and I hope people will have seen the House at its best this afternoon.

I have worked a lot with the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) on modern slavery, and he always works with such compassion. The tone that he set on having a non-stigmatising debate was a very good one. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) picked up that theme too and I think we have managed to have such a debate. It is important that we continue that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) made some points on alcohol labelling, following his recent debate on the subject. It would be helpful to hear clearly from the Minister that the briefing that such labelling was to be dropped is wrong. I think that is what we heard from her, but it would be helpful if she was very clear that that briefing is inaccurate. Will she pick up on the idea of having a national alcohol strategy and say how she feels about bringing together some of the existing strategies to attack many of the commonalities—for example, in relation to mental health services?

I spoke about mental health services earlier, as did others, including my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), whose points about treatment services for children were very well made. After a decade of real famine in this police area and the continued failures in CAMHS, there is a commitment in the strategy on investment in healthy-weight services; I am keen to hear from the Minister some extra detail about what form that is going to take. If she does not have those details today, will she say when we are going to start to hear some and when we will have a chance to debate what form that is going to take? My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake) and the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) picked up on a point I raised in my opening remarks about eating disorders and they strongly displayed just how people feel, certainly those who are working and active in supporting people with eating disorders. We are very lucky to have those people still making that case after such a challenging year for their support services. I hope the Minister has heard that, because I strongly believe that the impact assessment does not pay prominent enough regard to it. I hope she will confirm that she is still in listening mode and perhaps give us a date for when we can hear about and debate that secondary legislation, now that it has been published. I hope she will use this time to seek to meet some of those concerns.

Let me turn to contributions from Conservative Members. I was struck by the one from the right hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Alun Cairns) on knowledge and skills, because the cruelty in all this is that scratch cooking is not only better for us, but cheaper. It is one of the few things where doing the right thing really rewards us. If my wife was watching this—let's face it, she's not—she would roll her eyes and say, "It tastes better if you do it right." She has tasted my cooking and scrutinised my app-based ordering late at night, so she might say that I am in danger of a bit of hypocrisy there, but nevertheless it is true that scratch cooking is cheaper and healthier.

The hon. Members for Keighley (Robbie Moore) and for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) picked up on the idea of education programmes. Whether or not we characterise them, as he did, as a recommitment to home economics, these sorts of programmes are effective. It is not making a particularly aggressively

[Alex Norris]

partisan point to say that a decade of cutting the public health grant has meant that, in essence, these services have disappeared across the country, but they did exist and can do so again. I hope that we will see a reinstatement of them, and I do not think it is nannying to do that. When this is done intergenerationally as well, it can have a great social benefit. The evidence behind it was good, and I would love to see a report on it.

The point made by the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) about public opinion was very important, as that issue has not been covered much. There has been a lot of talk about personal choice, to which I will turn shortly, but the public are ahead of us on this. On the vast majority of the interventions, even the ones I am most sceptical about, the public are more bullish than I am, so it is important that we do not lose that from the debate.

We heard contributions from the hon. Members for Woking (Mr Lord) and for Warrington South (Andy Carter) about the ad ban, which is not a silver bullet, as the Minister has said, although it is impactful. I might argue that the vigour with which those who oppose it say it is a bad idea shows why it might be a good one. Nevertheless, I hope the Minister will again demonstrate that she is in listening mode. When the industry comes together with proposals that meet the Government's stated aims, I hope they will be given a fair hearing—that is entirely reasonable.

The right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) made very good points about reformulation, which is the big goal here; whatever we do with menus, what we have seen from the sugar tax is that once firms really put their shoulder to the wheel on this, we can do some incredible things. The progress made in the past decade or so, certainly in the soft drinks industry on reformulation, is a really good sign. I did not quite agree with the point he made on demonising products, as I do not think that that is the purpose. For me, the goal here should be informed choice, which all Members have talked about, and our knowing what is in those products. I do not think manufacturers would fear that, and they should not either. The point about informed choice was also raised by the hon. Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith), who talked about “overreaching”. I would think the proposal we are talking about is quite modest; there are no bans in here, certainly not of products—it is just about ensuring clarity of what is in them, and we should do that.

I want to come to the point about free choice, as it was made by many Members, including the hon. Members for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer) and for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller). If this is genuinely a matter of free choice—this is the thing I just cannot get past on this issue—why does obesity happen disproportionately on the same streets and estates, year after year, generation after generation, even though the people in those houses change? If this was purely a matter of free choice it would not happen that way and would be much more evenly distributed across the country, but all the evidence tells us that that is not the case, so I cannot quite accept that point, I am afraid.

I was not going to do this, but I thought the hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire was a bit unkind to me by suggesting I had offered “breathless” support

to the Government. I might have been breathless but was trying to get a lot in and wanted colleagues to have a chance to contribute too, and I think there was balance in what I said. I know the hon. Gentleman now differentiates what is being proposed today from the sugar tax, but I remember even though I was not a Member at the time that he was very publicly and prominently against the sugar tax, saying it would not work. I do not think that has been borne out by the facts since then, and I gently say I think he is wrong again in the same way today.

I have now given a quick canter around all the contributions, which were very good, even the ones that perhaps I would not agree with and that were made by Members who might not have agreed with my contribution. We have got the strategy—we have had it since July—and what I want to hear from the Minister now is a real emphasis on delivery and implementation and on recognising the concerns raised by Members and those outside this place, and a real sense of how we will work together to implement it. As I have said, where that is done in an evidence-based way, we will be supportive, because this is a very big prize indeed.

4.50 pm

Jo Churchill: With the leave of the House, I would also like to thank everyone for the tone of the debate. It is important that we discuss these things and do so in the right way, which is essentially reflected in the comment of my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer) that he did not come into politics to tell people what to do. Neither did I; I came here to help them, and the crux of this strategy is to inform, to educate and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) said, to slowly knit together policies such as the Office for Health Promotion and the Healthy Start vouchers so that we can start changing lives, and so that children do not end up in front of my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) as a 12-year-old weighing 9 stone, with the concomitant effect that one in 10 adults over 40 have diabetes and 4.7 million people in this country have diabetes. I have met the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) to discuss diabetes, the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) to discuss vascular disease—which is, again, completely compounded by carrying weight—and my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central to discuss the childhood challenges of poverty. We have often spoken about how particularly challenged Stoke-on-Trent is.

In no particular order, as I just happen to randomly have these figures to hand, I shall state that 8.6% of children in Northampton go into reception classed as obese, but that figure rises to 18.5% when they leave—about a 9.9% uplift. In the Forest of Dean the corresponding figures are 10.3%, with 19.3% of all children in year 6 coming out as obese. In Bedford the figures are 8.9% and 21% of all children, and more than six in 10 adults are overweight or obese.

Actually, I think the time has come to do something, and to help and to assist, because I do not think on our watch we can do nothing. This is about helping people have more quality, healthy life years, and surely that is why we are here. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham said, when we eat out we consume double the calories; surely it is better that we help inform, because if we were to prepare the food, we would have half the calories.

We are not banning advertising; indeed, we are offering probably the greatest marketing and advertising opportunity as we come out of the covid crisis. It cheered me this week that Kellogg's has indicated that it will reformulate the amount of fat, salt and sugar in its products, taking out 10% of sugar and 20% of salt. The whole reason that the policy exists is to try to put children and, arguably, all of us on a better trajectory.

All the contributions were excellent, but I listened with some sorrow to my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith). I know his county and, indeed, I represent a rural county. I am not demonising breakfast cereals. Kellogg's is going in the direction that its customers are demanding—I think, as the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) said, that customers are ahead of us in this House on this—and reformulating, which is what we want it to do. A noble Friend in the other place once mentioned porridge and was derided for doing so, but I want to help families and children so that, no matter what they can access and purchase, they are, by default, able to access a healthier choice, so that they are not forced into making the choice of saying, "That, at least, is something to give my children".

We are not banning butter, so my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham can rest assured that he will still be able to have his butter on a bit of toast, if that is what he likes. I will not repeat A.A. Milne's:

"I do like a little bit of butter to my bread!"

However, we are also not putting more than 16 product lines into this, because we have listened to industry, the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) and various others who have noted the challenges. I talk regularly to the Minister for Patient Safety, Suicide Prevention and Mental Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries), and we are incredibly cognisant of those who have eating disorders. The road that we travel has to be balanced so that people can make the right, informed choices.

Mr Harper: May I press the Minister—

Jo Churchill: No, I am terribly sorry, I have only two minutes left, but I am more than happy to talk to my right hon. Friend at considerably more length. He asked me for a bit of evidence on the sugary drinks tax. There is the fact that that, over three years, it has reduced the calories consumed on every occasion that somebody drank a soft drink by 35.2%. The figures on out-of-home calorie labelling show that £5.6 billion will be saved for the economy over 25 years, and that is before we even get to the associated benefits to people's health.

I am sorry that I am probably not going to answer every point, but we want to achieve the full potential of all people. It is about a joint effort. My hon. Friend the

Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) has been a doughty campaigner. I have met members of Bite Back 2030 with him, and those are young people asking us to do something. I am working with colleagues in the Department for Education and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to make sure that we are doing that. Indeed, the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), who is on the Front Bench next to me, and I have the food strategy. Part 1 is already out and we are expecting part 2 in short order—that will very much go towards responding to what my hon. Friends the Members for Keighley (Robbie Moore) and for Stoke-on-Trent Central said. That Minister and I have worked together, with the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), to look at how we can promote healthy eating for children and work across Government to drive these objectives.

I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), who said that this was about education, changing behaviour, changing the environment and not demonising individual foods. I want everyone to get to where he has, so I can see a future career as a healthy weight consultant, if nothing else. I congratulate Lucozade on what it has done. We will be continually monitoring the situation to make sure that we achieve our ambition on this. Partnership is key, and we are working with local authorities and working to build healthy weight management services. Promoting good health is central to this Government's health agenda, and we will do that through the new Office for Health Promotion and proactively take the burden of preventable ill health and empower everyone to make the right choice. We would like to see immediate results, but the situation is complex, and we know it will take time. We all have a lot to gain by helping people achieve and maintain a healthy weight, and I look forward to the support of the whole House in doing that.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered implementing the 2020 Obesity Strategy.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I ask Members to leave the Chamber in a covid-friendly way. The Minister for the Adjournment will not touch the Dispatch Box cover, because I am going to ask the Serjeant at Arms to sanitise it while we hear the opening speech.

Distant Fleet Fishing: Kirkella Trawler

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

5 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): This year, the UK fishing industry set out on its voyage as part of a newly independent coastal state. The Government made grand pronouncements about the benefits that would come flowing to the industry. However, rather than helping it to sail confidently across the promised sea of opportunity, the Government appear to have left it to become becalmed on a stagnant millpond.

Fishers from Penzance to Peterhead are out of work and angry. They have been badly let down, and they have every reason and every right to ask why. Why are small fishing boats tied up and idle around our shores? Why can we not sell our high-quality catches to continental markets? Why have we lost fishing opportunities outside our own waters that we have fished for generations? This Administration, and the Secretary of State for the Environment in particular, have sat back and watched as the whole industry slowly sinks. It beggars belief.

Throughout the Brexit negotiations this Government promised our fishermen that they would see great bounty from the fishing opportunities as our waters came back under the UK's sovereign control. Instead, the pressure of competition from foreign fleets has not eased, even in the inshore areas that the Government promised to preserve for the UK fleet. No bounty there. What our fishers do catch is snared in red tape that makes exporting the catches to continental markets untenable. This is a crippling double-blow for our fishermen. If that was not damaging enough, the UK's once-proud distant water fleet, whose very last remaining vessels bring jobs and great economic benefit to my constituency in Hull West and Hessle, has been holed below the waterline by a Government who have objectively failed to secure a single fisheries deal with any of their northern coastal neighbours—not a single one.

I will put that into context. There are four fisheries-based economies around the north Atlantic that are not EU members. The UK has had friendly relations with Norway, Greenland, Iceland, and the Faroes for years—at least since the Icelandic cod wars, which marked the beginning of the decline of the UK's distant water fleet. As Brexit approached towards the end of last year, the Government trumpeted loudly that they had achieved historic fisheries deals with all those states, implying that all would be well for the UK's distant water fleet. Those assurances now look to be disingenuous at best.

Two of the historic deals, with Greenland and Iceland, contain no basis for future negotiation over access to their waters for the UK fleet. The other two, with Norway and the Faroes, were merely agreements to sit down and talk at some later date. The fishing industry is dying now, not at some later date. The House will know that until 31 December 2020, the UK fleet had valuable and long-standing fishing rights in Norwegian and Greenlandic territorial waters worth millions of pounds. Those stocks cannot be replaced with quotas in UK waters. Arctic cod is abundant in their waters and non-existent in ours.

Until this year, Kirkella, a Hull-based ice-class distant waters trawler, was plying her trade in the sub-Arctic waters on trips lasting up to three months at a time,

bringing home one in every dozen portions of cod and haddock sold for the UK's fish and chip shops. She was the only UK vessel catching in those waters. Today, with no deal struck by this Government with either Norway or Greenland, this valuable British-caught fish will be lost to us, only to be replaced by the self-same fish, but this time caught by Norway and exported tariff-free into the UK market.

In one failed negotiation, the Secretary of State for the Environment has handed over 8% of the UK's market for takeaway fish and chip suppers to Norwegian and Icelandic fishermen and has cut English fishermen out of the market entirely. I suspect that there will be Members on both sides of the House reflecting on how tragic it is that the Government could not keep even that small part of our national British dish.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Lady is trying to clearly outline the issue of extra quota coming to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I say to her gently, as I did beforehand, that it is more than the Kirkella and her constituency; the Northern Ireland Fish Producers' Organisation, the Anglo-North Irish Fish Producers Organisation and the Scottish Pelagic Fishermen's Association all wish to see extra quota coming to them as well. Does she agree that we should all benefit from this?

Emma Hardy: Absolutely—any quota that the British Government secure should be there to benefit everybody.

We have lost jobs, markets and investment. Those are the results in my constituency, and across the country, of the Government's inability to land a deal with their neighbours. UK Fisheries and the Kirkella acquired the failing interests of the last of the UK's distant water fleet two decades ago. It amalgamated those investments in Hull, made Hull the Kirkella's home port and established its headquarters down the road near the Humber bridge. It invested more than £180 billion in the business, and until now was able to safeguard the livelihoods of hundreds of crew, staff and their families. Not only that, the Kirkella's owners had earmarked another £100 million in future investment in the hope and expectation of new or better fishing opportunities, promised by the Government after Brexit, as the UK took its place on the international stage as an independent coastal state.

Now, as a direct consequence of these negotiations, there will be no new investment or new jobs in the Humber area. Worse, all the existing jobs will soon be gone. Again, the crew and their families across the Humber region have every right to ask why. This is why: because when push came to shove the Government failed to strike a single agreement with any of the friendly partner economies, despite the almost total reliance of those states on the UK as an export market for their main fisheries products—cod, haddock, salmon and prawns.

There is, of course, a human impact too. There is one Hull resident I would like to mention. His name is Charles Waddy, and he will not mind me saying that he is in his 60s or that he started working in Hull's distant water fleet 47 years ago. Charlie's dad was a fisherman too and, as any fisherman will tell us, it is more than a profession; it is a way of life that runs through generations. Charlie's dad was lost at sea in 1961 along with four others when the Arctic Viking sank off Flamborough Head in heavy seas—brave men who gave their lives

bringing home fish to feed the nation. Charlie was there during the cod wars, which marked the beginning of the decline of the distant water fleet. He devoted his life to distant water fishing, and today he is first mate on the *Kirkella*—a job with great responsibility, and that he loves.

However, Charlie Waddy has no idea whether he will still have a job in three months' time. Nor do any of the other crew members who rely on the *Kirkella* and her continued ability to fish in sub-Arctic waters. UK Fisheries has just announced the sale of one of its boats to Greenland—Norma Mary—in order to keep *Kirkella* viable. That means that 25 UK crew are now without jobs. Those are not just abstract statistics; they are real people, real jobs and real families who are suffering now. These fishermen are part of the lifeblood of this great maritime nation of ours.

The Secretary of State might say, in fact he has said, that the owners of the *Kirkella* are foreign and therefore deserve no special treatment, but UK Fisheries is no more foreign than Jaguar Land Rover, Newcastle Brown Ale or Tetley Tea. The jobs and investment that it provides are of true economic benefit to the UK, and support hundreds of families in and around Hull and the broader north-east. All the fish that it catches are sold in British chippies. The crew are almost entirely British. They, and the company that employs them, pay their taxes here in the UK.

In short, UK Fisheries is the perfect example of the sort of inward investment that this country is seeking in its much trumpeted global Britain; yet the Secretary of State has hung it out to dry. As one of the first moves in the UK's new trading relationship with the world, that sends entirely the wrong message to those considering investing foreign capital in our industries. It will send them looking for other more appreciative and more secure homes for their money.

The Secretary of State will say that in seeking deals with our neighbours, he is looking for the best balanced deal for the entire UK fleet. If the current situation is balanced, that is only because it is almost equally damaging to everybody. It is difficult to see how no deal with Norway, Greenland or the Faroes benefits any part of the UK fleet. It has removed the distant water fleet's ability to catch off the coast of Norway and has prevented Scottish and English whitefish fleets from catching in southern Norway. Perhaps the Secretary of State will tell the House exactly which part of the UK fleet gains from no deal and how, on balance, that is a good deal for the rest of the fleet.

The Minister may say that the mackerel and herring that the Norwegians have until recently caught in our waters is a valuable resource to the Scottish fleet. She may be right, but that fleet is already the biggest, and perhaps only, winner from Brexit and makes up only a modest part of the UK fleet as a whole. Does she understand that the mackerel and herring that the Norwegians would like to continue catching in UK waters form part of their own North sea quotas and that they will simply catch them as younger stock in their own waters? That will not only be less sustainable for the whole North sea stock, but damage the UK's share of that stock. Where is she getting her advice?

The Secretary of State or the Minister may also say that there is still some cod to be caught off Svalbard. That may be true, but it amounts to just 5,500 tonnes,

about a third of what the UK would be entitled to catch in Norwegian waters alone if it had not left the EU. Combined with the UK's total Arctic cod catches from Svalbard in the Norwegian zone, that would have been approximately 20,000 tonnes. Five thousand tonnes will not provide long-term employment for anyone in the Humber region. They might say that that is just fine, because next year there will be different negotiations—but those negotiations start in earnest in only three or four months' time, as the Minister told me in a meeting this week. What will she do next year that she did not do this year? What assurances does she have for Charlie Waddy and his shipmates that next year will be any different?

The Government's track record in the area is far from encouraging. They made grand promises to the UK fishing industry, but I am sad to say that they have reneged on them both: they have failed the entire UK fleet in negotiations with the EU and are now set to preside over the end of our distant water fleet. It is a sorry state of affairs when the fleet that once fed this country through two world wars is finally sunk—not by enemy action, but by the decision, or perhaps indecision, of this Government. If the Secretary of State is not on the side of the fishermen who put their trust in him, whose side is he on? Right now, no reasonable person could say that it is the fishermen's.

I make this plea to the Minister and the Secretary of State on behalf of my constituents. Will the Secretary of State personally reach out to his opposite number in Norway tomorrow to look for ways to strike a deal as soon as humanly possible, so that people like Charles Waddy can be confident that they will have a job in three months' time and so that much-needed investment will find its way to Hull—or will he continue to sit back and watch this once proud industry slip below the water for good?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Karl Turner has sought and received from the mover of the debate, Emma Hardy, and from the Minister responding, Victoria Prentis, permission to make a short contribution. I have been informed, as per the rules.

5.13 pm

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): I do not intend to detain the House for very long. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) for securing this incredibly important debate, and to the Minister for indicating to me that she is content for me to take a little of her time.

We have a proud history in Hull and a proud heritage of fishing, but historically it was dangerous work. It would be wrong of me not to briefly mention Big Lil Bilocca, because if she were here, she would have something to say to the Minister. It is true that, following the triple trawler disaster and tragedy, Big Lil campaigned with men and women in Hull to improve the safety standards of fishermen at sea, and also the terms and conditions of those hard-working men. She campaigned with my predecessor, Lord Prescott. The people of Hull are very proud of Big Lil.

It is true that the industry has been in decline for decades, but the *Kirkella* provided a safe fishing future so that lads and lasses in schools in my constituency and that of my hon. Friend could plan a fishing career

[Karl Turner]

where they would earn a good living and have proud employment. They have been let down by this Government.

This is not about leave versus remain or left versus right; it is about what is right and what is wrong. We are not arguing about fishing rights that we got as members of the European Union. The fishing rights we are talking about are those that we had long before we joined the European Union in 1974, so it is simply not good enough, Minister, to say to me and my hon. Friend, “Listen, don’t worry, we are doing the preparation now for the negotiations to start next year.” We need to get a grip now. We need to take back control. That is what we need to do, and if we cannot get the answer we need for those men and women—those 100 crew members—we need to be speaking to the Treasury about compensation. Get a grip.

5.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Victoria Prentis): I congratulate both representatives from Hull on securing this debate on such an important issue. It was good to meet them earlier in the week and earlier today, and I look forward to continuing our conversations over the months ahead. They both represent areas with a proud fishing history, as indeed do the other Members present in the House this evening.

I understand that this is a difficult time for the Kirkella, her crew, UK fisheries and, indeed, parts of the wider industry. I want to take this opportunity to set out the background to the recent fisheries negotiations and why the UK and Norway have been unable to conclude bilateral fisheries agreements so far this year.

Jim Shannon: Will the Minister give way?

Victoria Prentis: I will make a bit more progress, I think.

When the UK was a member of the EU, UK vessels were able to fish in Greenlandic, Norwegian and Faroese waters because of agreements that the EU had in place. Those agreements, however, caused fundamental difficulties for the UK. It was interesting that the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) said that this is not about left and right or Brexit and remain. I agree: it is about fairness.

The agreements that were in place when we were an EU member meant that in 2019, for example, the value of the fish that Norway landed from UK waters was approximately eight times higher than that of the fish that we landed from Norwegian waters. We gained £30 million-worth, and it gained £250 million-worth. That gives hon. Members some idea of the difference. About 197 Norwegian vessels fished in our waters, compared with about 50 of our vessels fishing in its waters. Similarly, Faroese catches in UK waters were worth about 21 times the value of those caught by UK vessels in Faroese waters.

With those deals, there was an effective deficit to the UK of £218 million with respect to Norway and £24 million with respect to the Faroe Islands. That was because we were a member of the EU. We were not an independent coastal state and we could do nothing about that.

I suspect that the House agrees that such arrangements are not in the best interests of the UK in the long term. As an independent coastal state, our fisheries relationships in the north-east Atlantic must change, and we must move away from this highly unbalanced position.

Jim Shannon: Does the Minister agree that, as an independent coastal state, the UK is right to seek redress for the years of imbalance in fishing agreements negotiated by the EU, which in the case of Norway has resulted in eight times as much seafood being harvested by Norwegian vessels operating in UK waters than vice versa?

Victoria Prentis: I do agree, and indeed am trying to explain how very imbalanced the relationship has been in recent years.

It is, of course, challenging for our neighbours as we seek to make those adjustments and to strike the right balance in our relationships with our fellow coastal states. We started annual negotiations with Norway in January. We met with the Norwegians extensively and put several offers on the table. As I have set out, the priority for us was to rebalance the relationship. We are not willing to give valuable access to our waters for free.

During our fisheries negotiations, it is important—I see in the Chamber Members from Scotland and from Northern Ireland, and from other parts of the UK—that we represent the whole UK. We must also focus on long-term strategic outcomes, not just those for this year. A deal acceptable to Norway that retained some of the imbalance would not be in our national interest, and a similar dynamic developed in our negotiations with the Faroese.

The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) mentioned that we do not have an agreement in place with Greenland. The EU pays money, not quota, for access to Greenland’s waters. It pays about €16.5 million a year, in money. There might well be opportunities to agree for UK vessels quota and access sharing agreements with Greenland, but the House must understand that there is difficulty in replicating the arrangements the EU has with Greenland. That would doubtless involve a direct payment of taxpayers’ money, which would benefit private companies that catch the quota. I do not see us wanting to go down that route.

It is important to make it clear to the House that the Kirkella still has access to significant fishing quota in Norwegian waters around Svalbard.

Karl Turner: Will the Minister give way?

Victoria Prentis: No, I will make progress if I may.

In a separate arrangement with the Norwegian authorities, the UK received access to fish 5,500 tonnes of cod in the Svalbard area, as the hon. Lady said. That is not to be sniffed at. It is worth approximately £12.6 million to UK fisheries, which will fish that quota. I understand that the Kirkella has apparently used half that quota to date and has about half left to fish, as well as the majority of its quota in UK waters. I appreciate that that is less than it has had in previous years—I do appreciate that, and I am not in any way seeking to downplay it—but those are substantial fishing opportunities none the less.

Karl Turner: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Victoria Prentis: No, I will carry on if I may.

Let me answer the hon. Lady. The Secretary of State has written this week to his Norwegian counterpart, expressing a desire to continue to work closely with Norway this year and looking forward to the formal start of the negotiations for 2022 in September, as soon as the science, which is so important, becomes available.

I should also make clear, as perhaps I have not done so, the fact that we have never taken our offer for this year off the table. Our offer to Norway remains on the table and our door is completely open if the Norwegians wish to begin to negotiate with us again, but I re-emphasise that that must be based on fairness in the future. We look forward to restarting the cycle of negotiations. As hon. Members know, the preliminaries have started. We await the science, then negotiations will start formally in September.

The Government recognise the need to support the fishing sector generally to transition and prepare for a new long-term future. I am pleased that we have gone well beyond our manifesto commitment, and the Prime Minister has announced that £100 million will be invested across the UK for transformative seafood projects. The projects will rejuvenate the industry—and, I hope, our coastal communities—through training and qualifications, infrastructure projects and the development and roll-out of science and innovation across the supply chain.

Emma Hardy: I am sure the Minister will recall the conversation we had earlier in the week about workforce retention. As I mentioned in my speech, we have already lost 25 British crew members in the fisheries industry because of the failure to secure that deal. I also mentioned my constituent Charlie Waddy, who might not continue as a first mate if the *Kirkella* is unable to continue to fish to the level it did before. There is not much point in preparing a workforce for an industry that is in decline if the support is not there any more. As my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) asked, what compensation will be given to those fishermen and women to secure them in work until a new deal is negotiated?

Victoria Prentis: I do not share the hon. Lady's analysis of the future of the UK's fishing industry. We believe that there is a bright and sustainable future for the industry.

Turning, if I may, to the impact on jobs, I recognise that seafood processing in particular has huge regional significance and that it makes a really important contribution to Grimsby. My hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Lia Nici), whom I met yesterday to discuss this with, reminds me of that very regularly indeed. The gross value added is almost £300 million, and there is a turnover for processing of over £1 billion in most years from 2018 onwards. The area accounts for over 30% of seafood processing jobs in the UK.

Karl Turner: Is the Minister suggesting that those fishermen and women should transfer to doing factory work onshore? Is that the alternative the Minister is offering?

Victoria Prentis: I do not recognise the picture of the jobs situation that has been painted by the two representatives from Hull. I do not recognise the hon. Lady's figures. I have been briefed that all the crew are self-employed share fishermen. We think that about 30 to 34 crew are being employed on the *Kirkella*. As I said earlier, there are still significant fishing opportunities for the *Kirkella* this year in Svalbard, and we will continue to work hard to make a deal for fishing opportunities next year.

Moving to another point that the hon. Lady raised, the majority of raw materials used in processing in Humberside are sourced from imports, as they long have been. We are seeing significant investment in the seafood sector in the region. Young's, for example, is currently running a recruitment campaign for 400 people, which is a great indicator of how the hub in the region is doing. I am not suggesting that every crew person transfers into processing jobs; I am merely trying to explain that there are good jobs in the seafood sector in the region, and that we are really pleased to support those where we can.

On a good news note, we have noticed a significant uplift in retail sales of seafood recently. The Government are working closely with bodies such as Seafish to ensure that the British public continue to develop their appetite for British fish. I want to see continued growth in this industry and more fantastic UK seafood being enjoyed by the British public.

This has been a period of considerable change for the fishing world and the wider sector, including for processes and hospitality. In its response to the covid pandemic, the sector has demonstrated again and again how resilient and adaptable it can be. Adjusting to our position as an independent coastal state is also challenging, but I am confident that, as we continue to work with other neighbouring coastal states, there is a bright and environmentally sustainable future for British fishing.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Before I put the question, let me thank all staff of the House for the incredible work that they have put in. I hope that they have an enjoyable May week's recess.

Question put and agreed to.

5.29 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 27 May 2021

[Ms NUSRAT GHANI *in the Chair*]

World Press Freedom Day

Virtual participation in proceedings commenced (Order, 25 February).

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

1.30 pm

Ms Nusrat Ghani (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that there have been some changes to normal practice in order to support the new hybrid arrangements. Members participating physically and virtually must arrive for the start of Westminster Hall debates and are expected to remain for the entire debate. I also remind Members participating virtually that they are visible at all times, both to each other and to us in the Boothroyd Room. If Members attending virtually have any technical problems, they should email the Westminster Hall Clerks at their email address, which is westminsterhallclerks@parliament.uk. Members attending physically should clean their spaces before they use them and as they leave the room. I also remind Members who are here with me physically that Mr Speaker has stated that masks should be worn in Westminster Hall debates, unless the Member is contributing.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered World Press Freedom Day 2021.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ghani. World Press Freedom Day, which falls on 3 May, is a reminder to Governments of the need to respect their commitment to press freedom; a day of reflection among media professionals about issues of press freedom and professional ethics; and a day of support for media workers who are targets for the restraint or abolition of press freedom. It is also a day of remembrance for those journalists who lost their lives in the pursuit of a story.

I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for having granted time for this debate today, which has been the first opportunity to hold it since the start of the new parliamentary Session. I also declare my interest as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on media freedom, which is supported by Reporters Without Borders.

This debate comes in the wake of last Sunday's hijacking of a civilian aircraft by the Belarusian Government in order to kidnap the journalist Roman Protasevich, an outspoken critic of President Lukashenko's illegitimate and oppressive regime. This is one of the most audacious attacks on press freedom we have seen, but it is just another example of the increasingly brazen way in which Governments seek to oppress legitimate journalism with increasing impunity.

In 2018, we saw the murder of Jamal Khashoggi by agents of the Saudi Arabian Government in the grounds of their own consulate in Istanbul. In 2017, Daphne Caruana Galizia, a campaigning journalist who investigated corruption and organised crime and delved into visa-for-sale

schemes, energy deals and Caribbean offshore companies set up for Maltese politicians, was assassinated by a car bomb planted by a professional hitman.

According to Reporters Without Borders, 50 journalists were killed around the world last year, and a further 13 have already been killed in 2021. These include Sadida Sadat and Shahnaz Roufi in Afghanistan, who worked for Enikass TV's dubbing service and were gunned down in an alley in Jalalabad as they were walking home at around 4.30 pm. Their colleague Mursal Waheedi was shot in the rickshaw she had taken to go home. All three women were aged 20 or 21. Furthermore, in 2020, 387 journalists and media workers were held in detention: 117 of those were in China, and 34 were in the next highest country, Saudi Arabia. In the Philippines, in the five years since President Rodrigo Duterte came to power, 16 journalists have been killed in connection with their work, the latest of whom was beaten to death in May 2020.

Media freedom is being threatened not just by violent physical attack, but by the use of dubious legal procedures to intimidate or close down journalists. In the Philippines, Maria Ressa, a journalist and the chief executive of the digital news service Rappler, has been under repeated legal attack since the election of Duterte. Rappler has tirelessly investigated human rights violations and the country's increasingly authoritarian Government, and Ressa, whom I am proud to serve alongside on the Real Facebook Oversight Board, currently faces 10 open charges against her, relating to nine separate cases. Some of those have been brought retrospectively through new laws created since the alleged offences occurred.

In this country, too, our legal system is being used to intimidate legitimate journalism through lawfare—the misuse of legal systems and principles against an opponent by seeking to damage or delegitimise them, wasting their time and money—and what is known as SLAPP, a strategic lawsuit against public participation. Such actions are intended to censor, intimidate and silence critics by burdening them with the cost of legal defence until they abandon their criticism of the opponent. The initiator of such a lawsuit does not usually expect to win, but to wear down the defendant until they succumb to fear, intimidation and mounting legal costs or exhaustion, and cease their otherwise legitimate criticism. A current example is the journalist Catherine Belton, author of “Putin's People”, which was published last year by HarperCollins, who is facing lawsuits, along with her publisher, filed in London by four Russian businessmen, including Roman Abramovich.

Mr Abramovich has also recently forced apologies from British newspapers—*The Times* and *The Daily Mail*—for stating that he gave a yacht, *Le Grand Bleu*, to Eugene Shvidler, a Russian-American oil billionaire, despite the fact that Mr Shvidler had stated this himself in English court proceedings on 14 November, 2011, during the hearing of the *Berezovsky v. Abramovich* case. I also understand that in 2019, Mr Abramovich's lawyers were also successful in preventing the broadcast of a BBC “Panorama” investigation. It is interesting that Mr Abramovich, who is not a resident of the UK, has not visited the country since 2018 and has not been granted a new UK visa, can nevertheless retain the services of the London law firm Harbottle & Lewis and has full access to the English courts.

[Damian Collins]

Data protection legislation is also being routinely abused to make multiple requests against investigative journalists and corporate research and intelligence companies, for any information that they hold on any individual or organisation. In Australia, the Protection of Public Participation Act 2008 seeks to

“protect public participation, and discourage certain civil proceedings that a reasonable person would consider interfere with engagement in public participation.”

In the USA, high-profile public figures are also limited in their access to the courts to pursue such cases. It is time we looked at whether such reforms are required in the UK, and also to review the GDPR legislation to prevent it from being used to intimidate those engaged in legitimate investigations acting in the public interest.

We also have to consider the commercial pressures faced by the news industry today, which pose perhaps one of the greatest threats to the freedom of the press. In 2019, the Cairncross review, commissioned by the Government, highlighted that the sales of both national and locally printed papers have plunged. They fell by roughly half between 2007 and 2017, and are still dropping. In addition, print advertising revenues, which used to carry much of the cost of producing news, have fallen even faster, declining in that decade by 69%. To cut costs there have been mergers, as well as heavy cuts in staffing numbers of frontline journalists in the UK, and in that period those numbers have dropped from 23,000 to 17,000, and the numbers are still falling.

These pressures came to light recently in Australia, where an investigation by its competition authority has highlighted that for every \$100 of online advertising spend, \$53 goes to Google, \$28 to Facebook, and \$19 to everybody else. This creates enormous pressure on other organisations, particularly news companies and publishers that have in the past relied on advertising revenue to pay their journalists and investigations. The decline in ad revenue for publishers is a direct challenge to the news industry itself, which has already led to the closures of a great number of publications, and many of those that have survived have had to make significant cuts and reductions.

In order to preserve the future of public interest journalism, the Australian Government presented the news media bargaining code to oblige companies such as Facebook and Google to enter into commercial arrangements with the news industry to ensure fair remuneration for their content. It was only because they legislated to require this, and to give a regulator the power to mediate and set the term of remuneration if no deal was done, that Google and Facebook eventually did move. We have to consider what the role of journalism is in the digital age, where people increasingly use the internet as their primary source of news and information. The most recent Ofcom “Media Nations” survey, published last summer, showed that around 35% of people now regularly get their news from Facebook.

News media and the freedom of the press face a constant assault every day. Direct challenges are issued, through social media, against “the mainstream media”, which is used as a derogatory term, seeking to persuade the public that they should not believe the so-called mainstream media on anything they write, whether critical or praiseworthy, and putting people in a position

where they simply do not know what they should believe anymore. In the world of social media, where algorithms of engagement drive content through those platforms, often it is the misleading or the downright lies and conspiracy theories that gain a bigger audience, are more interesting and are actively promoted by those platforms. When Parliament considers the online safety Bill later this year—it is currently in draft form—we must take into account the impact of harmful disinformation, spread through and sometimes amplified by social media, which is undermining news and, through that, democracy itself.

We need to protect journalism and the freedom of the press if we are to remain an open and democratic society. We need to recognise that those values are increasingly under attack from authoritarian Governments around the world who actively and deliberately target journalists, sometimes physically, sometimes emotionally, sometimes economically, but always with intent to suppress their necessary work. We need to ensure that our modern media landscape, driven by social media platforms and their engagement, still works to provide fair remuneration for journalists creating content, because if journalists cannot be paid for what they do, few will do it. The people who will win in that situation will be those who fear legitimate investigation and questioning.

1.40 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind) [V]: I compliment the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) on securing the debate and on the way in which he introduced the subject. It is absolutely crucial and essential to all our lives that we think seriously about what press freedom actually means. In any free society, the right to know, the right to speak and the right to assemble are important and precious, and indeed are encapsulated in the 1948 universal declaration of human rights.

In considering press freedom, we should also look at media ownership and control, and the concentration of media ownership into a small number of global companies that impose news values on their outlets, which are not necessarily very open and which are often not interested in many of the poorest parts of the world but only in celebrity and the goings on in the wealthiest parts of the world. It is important that we recognise the importance of the right to know, and therefore the importance of diversity of ownership and diversity of access to the media.

As the hon. Gentleman quite correctly pointed out, many people now get most of their information from online sources, through social media and associated outlets. Many people simply do not buy newspapers and do not access newspaper websites or anything else. They rely completely on news that they believe they select themselves from various websites around the world, but they are often unaware of the complex, complicated and very efficient algorithms used to drive people in certain directions on certain stories and news issues.

We must look not only at the freedom of journalists and the importance of independent ownership of all media outlets, but at making social media accessible to everyone. Social media companies have shown themselves to be very happy to operate with authoritarian and oppressive regimes and close down access altogether to

certain individuals. For example, in the middle of their strike action in Delhi, Indian farmers suddenly found that they had no access whatsoever to social media, which was a crucial outlet for them. Social media is restricted in a number of countries, and Google and others are quite happy to do deals with national Governments in order to restrict access to information. These things have to be looked at seriously and carefully. We need international agreement on this, which I will come on to in a moment.

I have in front of me the “White Paper on Global Journalism”, produced by the International Federation of Journalists, of which I am a member, in the sense that I am a member of the National Union of Journalists in Britain. This report makes for chilling reading. Since 1990, as the hon. Gentleman has pointed out, 2,650 journalists have been killed around the world. Those are the ones we know of—there may well be more. A good friend of mine, Anabel Hernández, a Mexican journalist, launched a book called “The Sorrows of Mexico” with Lydia Cacho and others at the Edinburgh international book festival three years ago. I was there. She described what she had gone through in preparing the book and in writing about the power of drug cartels, corrupt police forces and the role of the military. She described the threats made to her:

“Ever since, I have lived with 24 hour protection, if you can call that living.”

The threat never goes away. On 21 December 2014, a dozen men, armed with AK47 rifles and handguns, closed off the street where Hernández lived, and started asking her neighbours in which house the journalist lived. They deactivated the security cameras in the immediate area, including those installed in her house. She was lucky that day, because she was not at home; she was away. That is the kind of life that she and other very brave journalists live in Mexico, in Colombia, in Egypt and in other countries where journalists are consistently under threat.

We mourn those who have been killed, but there are many others in jail and the threat of jailing journalists is a form of censorship. Many of the world’s Governments know that by consistently threatening journalists, they will either tone down their reporting or simply not report what is going on where corruption, drug cartels and so on are involved. There is a kind of league table of journalists who are in prison. Globally, there are 235 of them in prison—those are the ones we know of—including 67 in Turkey, 21 in Egypt and 20 in China. They are all people who have been imprisoned because they were trying to report the truth.

The hon. Gentleman quite rightly pointed out what happened to Roman Protasevich. Obviously, it is appalling that the plane was effectively hijacked and he was taken to Belarus because he had been writing stories that were critical of its regime. Obviously, action should be taken. I am a member of the Council of Europe and my fellow members and I will make our views very well known at subsequent meetings. Unfortunately, Belarus is not a member of the Council of Europe; it is the only European country that is not a member.

Our complaints and objections about the way in which Roman Protasevich is being treated would be far more credible if the London Stock Exchange was not at the same time hosting financial servicing arrangements and opportunities to raise cash for the Belarussian

Government. If we are serious about press freedom and freedoms in general, we must think very carefully about what financial institutions and others are doing.

The terrible events in Gaza and the west bank over the last few weeks and the loss of life of people both in Israel and in Palestine are obviously shocking and appalling. It is also very clear that the bombing was very effectively and efficiently targeted in Gaza. Two towers were taken out completely; they were demolished by targeted bombing. They included the offices of al-Jazeera and a number of other journalistic outlets in the region, so they could no longer effectively report what was happening in Gaza. Some brave journalists managed to use satellite phones and so on to keep in communication, but they were reporting while under fire from Israel that was quite clearly targeting those places where journalists were trying to report the reality of what is going on. And Yousef Abu Hussein, a young journalist, was killed during that whole process.

In this debate I hope that we can reflect on the bravery of journalists around the world—those who seek to speak truth to power and who try to tell us the truth about what is happening around the world. We all love newspapers; we all love news and information. However, we need to make sure that those who collect and gather that information—irritating as they often are to politicians; that is the world in which we live—are a crucial part of any democratic society.

The work done by the International Federation of Journalists and others in trying to get global agreement on the protection of journalists is very important. It is also important that the United Nations Human Rights Council continues its work on protecting journalists, and that we have an effective protection mechanism for journalists all around the world. Too many have died, too many are in prison and too many are frightened to report the news they ought to be reporting, because they are scared of what will happen to them if they do so.

We should not be complacent about our own society, either, because often in Parliament we have this sense of complacency that bad things—

Ms Nusrat Ghani (in the Chair): May I ask the right hon. Member for Islington North to bring his speech to a conclusion, please? Thank you.

Jeremy Corbyn: I apologise, Ms Ghani. I was not aware that there was a time limit. I will briefly say this. In our complacency, let us not forget brave people who have blown the whistle on the truth around the world. I think of Julian Assange and the work he has done in exposing what has happened around the world in preparation for war and other things. In some countries, he would be called a hero for being a whistleblower; here, he is called something very different. We should think of what news values and freedom of speech values are actually all about. Thank you for the opportunity to speak, Ms Ghani.

1.50 pm

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con) [V]: I have been practising the black arts of journalism for the best part of 50 years. In that time, I have had quite a few dodgy moments, but I have never been arrested, I have never been tortured and, patently, I have never been murdered.

[*Sir Roger Gale*]

I have published and reported on stories that politicians have not liked, but I can honestly say that I have not been subjected to political pressure and I certainly have not suffered from the online threats that, sadly, today's journalists suffer from.

I recognise that around the world there are very brave people going where I, frankly, would have feared to go in the interests of publishing and truth. It is right that we say "Thank you" on occasions to some people in power. I recognise the initiatives taken by the Foreign Secretary in pursuing this issue seriously through the global conference in London and as co-chair with Canada of the Media Freedom Coalition. Last December, the world press freedom conference highlighted the cause again, and I hope that it will be raised at the G7 in Cornwall, when we sit in the president's chair.

We do not often say "Thank you" to civil servants, so perhaps it is right that we recognise the work of Kanbar Hossein Bor, Louise Saville, Michelle Webster and Justin Williams, who head up the media freedom teams at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. We also ought to thank Rebecca Vincent of Reporters Sans Frontières, who I understand also provides the secretariat for the all-party parliamentary group on media freedom. They are doing valuable work, and we must be grateful to them.

During my time with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, we pursued this issue vigorously. My friend and colleague Lord Foulkes was, and still is, stalwart in seeking to defend media freedom. The appalling case of Roman Protasevich, which was instigated by Lukashenko, the President of Belarus, and the equally vile murder of Jamal Khashoggi, at the behest of the Saudi Arabian Government, are frightful. However, every day there is ongoing oppression of journalists in the Russian Federation, in China, in Azerbaijan, in Ethiopia, in Myanmar and most certainly in Turkey. BBC World Service reporters are under desperate pressure in Hong Kong and in Persia, and sadly, because of some careless words uttered by a previous Foreign Secretary, Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe is languishing in an Iranian prison on a trumped-up charge of teaching journalism—as if that was something that should not be done.

I have four questions to put to my right hon. Friend the Minister, and I hope he will be able to answer. First, will the subject of media freedom be on the G7 agenda for Cornwall? Secondly, will the Government of the United Kingdom be prepared to use Magnitsky sanctions in cases of breach of media freedom? Can my right hon. Friend assure us that the BBC's World Service funding, which at the moment is under an extension due to end in September, will be continued? That contribution to media freedom is vital. Finally, will the Government of the United Kingdom be prepared to back the call from Reporters San Frontières for a UN special representative for the safety of journalists?

1.55 pm

Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (Alba): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ghani. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) for securing this debate. It is appropriate that we celebrate World Press Freedom Day, because

press freedom is fundamental to our democracy. It is a basic right. We all know that knowledge is power and that, equally, its absence endangers us. Press freedom allows us to expose totalitarianism, often in the face of danger, as other Members have said.

I was privileged to know James Pringle, who returned to my old constituency to vote in the Scottish referendum back in 2014. He regaled me with tales about, first, having served in the Dominican coup and then having been the first western journalist into Cambodia under Pol Pot, after the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge. I pay tribute to his courage.

Press freedom is vital to democracy. I remember reading Professor Henry Milner's book, "Civic Literacy". It is a study of what motivates turnout in elections. A critical factor is not whether it is as easy to vote as to buy a tin of beans in a supermarket; what matters in particular is understanding, and a quality media is fundamental to that. If people do not understand the issues, they will not participate and vote. That factor is normally shown in this country in turnouts being higher in referendums, when there is a clear understanding of the issues, than in wider elections, where turnout can be significantly lower.

As other Members have said, there are obviously ongoing issues—in Saudi Arabia and Belarus, and indeed closer to home, with Julian Assange. I sympathise and agree with the points made by others across the political divide that these people require protection.

I listened with interest to the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe, who was correct to point out the changes that have happened in the media. I have been writing for the Scottish media for several years now. The decline is significant. There are actions we have to take to address that and to protect the valuable newspapers that are undermined by other platforms. We should also remember that in many instances now, social media is just as important as the mainstream media.

We have looked in this country at what happened in the Arab spring. It was not the mainstream media that was the outlet letting people know, both within the countries that were part of the Arab spring, and in the wider world. It was not the papers, held by the regimes. It was social media bloggers and just people tweeting, or writing on their Facebook pages or whatever else. The hon. Gentleman was right to warn about dangerous disinformation and the challenges that we face as a society to protect our democracy. Equally, we also have to remember that it is important that we support that.

That brings me to my own situation within my own jurisdiction of Scotland. It is many years since I first studied law. I have had 20 years practising as a lawyer and seven and a half years as Justice Secretary. I never thought I would face a situation where I was condemnatory of actions that have been happening against the press in my own country.

Since the days of learning about the Gordon Airds case, *HM Advocate v. Airds*, I always assumed that those who were seeking to put forward information that was appropriate and fair would be protected. Yet in Scotland, in the fallout from the Alex Salmond affair, we have seen Mark Hirst, a journalist, prosecuted. The case, in which he was supported by the NUJ, was rightly rejected by the presiding sheriff in the Borders. We have seen Craig Murray, a blogger and former British senior civil

servant, now facing a prison sentence of eight months. That is not only shocking, but drives a coach and horses through a position brought in by the Scottish Government that there be a presumption against a sentence of imprisonment for less than a year. Their absence of criticism and their failure to comment has been quite shocking.

It is not simply cases brought by the Crown. It is the cases that have been pursued by the police, where people so much as tweeting anything that might be seen as possibly identifying a witness have faced a knock on the door from the police. That is fundamentally damaging to Scottish democracy. It is not what I expect and it has not come about by happenchance. It has been deliberate. It has been targeted. It is being driven by the Crown Office. If we are to have a free press, there has to be free reporting. That has to apply to bloggers as much as it applies to the mainstream press.

That people have been charged in Scottish courts and have faced possible terms of imprisonment for simply doing exactly the same as the mainstream press has done but not faced prosecution is simply unacceptable. There is also a reason that I am required to raise it here: it is that the position of the Lord Advocate of Scotland is no longer tenable. There has to be a separation of powers of having one individual who is both a legal adviser to the Scottish Government and also the head of the prosecution service in Scotland. That is no longer appropriate and I am disappointed that the First Minister did not seek to make it faster. It is something that has to come back to this Chamber because as a result of the Scotland Act 1998, the Lord Advocate is enshrined in statute by this Parliament. Action must be taken here as well as in Holyrood.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (in the Chair): I must remind Members not to comment on any live cases.

2.1 pm

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ghani. I welcome this debate called by the hon. Member on world press freedom. We should be proud to live in a democracy where the press exercises a high level of freedom to highlight the truth and hold the Government to account. That does not mean we do not still face challenges in relation to the press in the UK and their reporting, in particular towards Muslims and minority communities.

Thankfully, we do not live in a nation where the regime in Government blows to smithereens the towers housing internationally renowned journalists such as in the AP building. Yes, I am speaking about the callous and totalitarian attack by the Israeli military a week or so ago in the tower housing both AP and al-Jazeera journalists. Much will be said in this debate about world press freedom relating to China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, North Korea or Iran, for instance, all of which our nation and I too share concerns about in regards to press freedom. However, just over a week ago, we watched the Israeli military blow up a mainstream media outlet, which the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said he had seen no evidence for. Despite such a devastating attack on press freedom, given the scale of the attack, the response by the so-called defenders of free speech was deafening in its silence, and the outright condemnation by our Government seemed to be written in invisible ink.

The latest siege on Gaza and targeted Israeli air force attacks have destroyed the premises of 23 Palestinian and international media outlets, according to some reports, in a single week. A statement by the nine experts to the United Nations Human Rights office stated:

“The indiscriminate or deliberate bombardment of civilians and towers housing civilians in Gaza and Israel, as well as media organizations and refugee camps in Gaza, are war crimes that are, prima facie, not justified by the requirements of proportionality and necessity under international law. All parties who engage in such attacks must bear individual and State responsibility as appropriate.”

Let me state just one example. At approximately 4.30 am on Wednesday 19 May, Israeli war planes targeted with three successive rockets, without prior warning, the fourth and fifth floors of the home of Muhammed Abdul Qadr Muhammed Abu Hussein, 63, consisting of five floors over an area of 120 square metres and located on Al-Gala Street near Sheikh Radwan junction north of Gaza City. Yousef Muhammed Abdul Qadr Abu Hussein, 32, a journalist who worked as a broadcaster for the local Voice of Al-Aqsa radio station, a husband and a father of three, was killed in that attack.

All that I have stated is a reality of the Israeli regime in only the last few weeks. Even after the ceasefire, AP reported that 17 journalists in Gaza had confirmed their WhatsApp accounts had been blocked. When 23 media houses are obliterated, journalists killed and social media networks blocked, where is press freedom? The question is whether the Government will still support the International Criminal Court investigation into the situation in Palestine, given Israel's repeated attacks on media outlets and journalists. I also remind the Minister of a statement from his colleague Lord Ahmad on the matter of press freedom. He said:

“Ultimately, we need every country to recognise that attacks on media freedom are beyond the pale. And just like any assault on human rights, and I speak as the UK Human Rights Minister, we must hold abusers accountable, both legally and financially.”

I agree that we need every country to recognise that attacks on media freedom will not be tolerated and legal and financial accountability will be the consequences. I say to the Minister that the mounting evidence of the Israel's alleged crimes is before him. If the Government truly want to support press freedom worldwide, they should support the investigation by the International Criminal Court into Israel's actions. At the very least, they should use today's debate on world press freedom as an opportunity to condemn the totalitarian actions by Israel and to support journalists within the region.

2.5 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind)[V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ghani, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) on securing this important debate to mark World Press Freedom Day 2021. It could not be more pertinent at a time when attacks on press freedom across the world and in parts of Europe are intensifying. Authoritarian Governments across the world have yet again demonstrated that, before all other things, they fear the power of the written word.

I start by paying my respects to Roman Protasevich, a Belarusian blogger and journalist who was captured by the Lukashenko regime in an aeroplane hijack last Sunday. Roman faces charges of terrorism in his native country for the pivotal role that his Nexta blog played

[Margaret Ferrier]

in instigating and co-ordinating the peaceful pro-democracy protests of last year. Belarus is the only country in Europe that retains the death penalty, which is a very real threat that Roman may now be facing. I believe all Members present share my deepest concern for Roman's wellbeing, and I insist in the strongest possible terms that the UK Government do everything in their power to help secure his immediate release.

Thirty-four journalists are now in prison in Belarus, and dozens of independent media outlets are being prevented from operating freely. This week, Alexander Lukashenko signed a decree that erects even more explicit legal barriers to the freedom of the press, including a prohibition on news outlets making live reports on unauthorised mass gatherings, new powers for the information ministry to order the closure of media outlets, and a ban on the publication of opinion polls that are unauthorised by the Government. The Belarusian police recently raided and shut down TUT.BY, the largest independent Belarusian media outlet, as a follow-up to revoking its media credentials last year.

There have also been reports of personal blackmail and the intimidation of journalists, such as the journalist Arina Malinovskaya, who works with the Belarusian independent TV channel Belsat. Arina, who is currently abroad, is reported by the Polish newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza* to have received threats from the Belarusian police that unless she returns to Belarus and presents herself at a police station, her sister and grandparents will suffer the consequences. Such tactics are designed to silence and intimidate even Belarusians in exile, and to prevent them from reporting systemic human rights violations in their home country. In August last year, the Government in Belarus removed the accreditation of two BBC journalists, meaning they are no longer able to work for the BBC legally. They are both Belarusian nationals who have worked for the BBC for a number of years. The BBC has called on the Belarusian authorities to revoke the decision and to allow the two journalists to continue to do their jobs.

Another part of the world where press freedom is undergoing a catastrophic deterioration is Hong Kong. Since the introduction of the national security law, the Government of China have been accelerating a full-scale crackdown on Opposition political activity and press. Last month, journalist Choy Yuk-ling was found guilty of making false statements and obtaining public information as part of an investigation into the perpetrators of a violent attack on protestors in a subway station in 2019. Choy was collecting the data as part of a documentary for the public broadcaster RTHK that also explored the conduct of Hong Kong police during last year's protests. Chris Yeung, the chairman of the Hong Kong Journalists Association, expressed himself plainly when he said:

"The government sent a reporter to the dock, she was found guilty and the fourth power is under threat. Press freedom in Hong Kong is dying."

As citizens of a liberal, democratic state, we are privileged in many ways to have access to an independent press and extensive civil liberties, and to have the freedom to use our voice to speak up for those whose voice has been denied. I hope that we are able to reflect, as parliamentarians today, on how we can assist the many thousands in Hong Kong, Belarus and across the world whose voices are being silenced.

2.10 pm

Claudia Webbe (Leicester East) (Ind) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Ghani. I congratulate the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) on securing this important debate.

Press Freedom Day comes at an important time: not only have we just witnessed the bombing of the building of two major outlets—al Jazeera and Associated Press—we have also just witnessed the latest example of widespread misreporting on the crisis between Israel and Palestine. The systemic violence against Palestinians and the continued illegal Israeli occupation is an international atrocity. Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestine territories have been identified by the United Nations as being in breach of international law, but across the British and western media landscapes the crisis is too often reported as a conflict, yet it is not a conflict between equals. It is about the occupier and the occupied. The Gaza strip is effectively an open-air prison, with 97% of the population having no access to clean water, and each bombing campaign further eroding living standards. It is a colonial war. The British empire was instrumental in the displacement and subjugation of the Palestinian people.

The UK and western press either fail to report on atrocities against the Palestinian people, or label the abuses as clashes and consistently misreport the systemic aggression, dispossession and violence directed at Palestinians. Such framing serves only to legitimise and obscure the scale of oppression in occupied Palestine. It is encapsulated by the case of US journalist Emily Wilder, who was sacked by Associated Press after it was unearthed that she had previously supported Palestinian rights. I urge the Independent Press Standards Organisation to do much more to ensure the accurate, contextualised and fair reporting of the crisis. A strong, diverse and independent media is a cornerstone of a healthy democracy and society.

I am also concerned by the continued imprisonment and attempted extradition of Julian Assange. That case presents a real danger to the freedom of the press. It extends the judicial reach of the US Government, and it deploys the US Espionage Act against a journalist for the very first time. We must oppose this attempt to criminalise journalism that involves reporting on classified information. If not, it could set a chilling precedent with grave implications for the functioning of our democracy. I believe that the US Government must drop the attempted prosecution, and the British Government must do all they can to halt a process from which there can be no satisfactory outcome for the freedom of the press.

A free press is essential for our public life, but sadly much of our press is really not free at all. A 2019 study by the Media Reform Coalition found that just three companies—News UK, the Daily Mail group, and Reach—dominate 83% of the national newspaper market, and that has actually increased by 11% in just four years. Looking at who owns those outlets, the right-wing bias in our media ecosystem becomes clear: five billionaires own around 80% of all UK media, and two billionaire press barons own half of the UK's top ten daily newspapers. The fact is that since 1979—a period spanning 11 general elections—no party has been able to reside in Government without the explicit backing of a newspaper owned by Rupert Murdoch.

Polling shows that the British press is the least trusted press in Europe. That is corrosive for our democracy. It is crucial that we support public interest journalism, including through charitable status for some local, investigative and independent media outlets. The BBC is of course an important institution, which we must defend from privatisation, but as recent weeks have shown, the BBC is far from perfect and much must be done to make it more democratic, representative and independent. The BBC must also be wary of amplifying the world view that is shared among the right-wing press. In the light of funding cuts and the loss of investigative reporters, too often it is billionaire-owned media outlets that set the agenda for our public service broadcaster.

I fully support the National Union of Journalists and the rights and conditions of workers in our media. Empowering journalists, such as by enabling them to elect editors and have seats on boards, is beneficial for our entire public discourse. To see a world defined by the imbalance of wealth and influence propped up and obfuscated by a compliant media system is intensely disempowering. Let us take as an example yesterday's explosive testimony from the former chief adviser to the Prime Minister. It should not have taken a disgruntled Government employee to expose this Government's deadly handling of the coronavirus. That was a damning indictment of our media ecosystem and revealed the cosy relationship between Government and client journalists. I believe that must end. Following this year's World Press Freedom Day, let us strive to build a vibrant media that is democratic, representative and truly independent.

2.16 pm

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Ghani. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) for securing this debate to celebrate World Press Freedom Day.

The debate comes at an important time. Mere weeks ago, the world watched in horror as the Gazan offices of al-Jazeera and Associated Press were razed to the ground by Israeli bombs in a brazen attack on the media. The International Federation of Journalists reported that, at the same time in Jerusalem, Israeli police were deliberately and systematically assaulting, beating and firing stun grenades at Palestinian media workers. Today, I add my voice to the calls, including by the IFJ, for an end to impunity for these war crimes and for the shameful attempt to silence the media and reporting on the ground. These events followed two complaints submitted by the IFJ to the UN special rapporteurs in December 2020 about Israel's systematic targeting of journalists working in Palestine and its failure properly to investigate killings of media workers—reminding us that the threats to journalists working in Palestine are consistent and stretch beyond the bombing campaigns.

The diversion of a flight and the arrest of journalist Roman Protasevich just days ago in Belarus, bringing the country's number of detained journalists to 24, further increases the urgency of this debate. President Lukashenko has also taken action to harass and block the country's most popular news website and has passed authoritarian measures relating to the media law.

Will the Minister call on the Government of whom he is a member to use every means at their disposal to compel the Israeli and Belarusian authorities to bring

an end to the attacks on journalists? It is the case that 2,658 media workers have been killed globally in the last 30 years; that is about two every single week. And 84% of journalists who were killed in 2020 were knowingly targeted and deliberately murdered; that was a significant increase from 63% in 2019. In nine out of 10 cases, the killings remain unpunished.

Press freedom in conflict zones is an absolute necessity, but concerningly there is an increasing trend of journalists being killed in countries considered to be at peace; it accounts for 68% of all those killed. We can say in no uncertain terms that this is a crisis of impunity. In the last year, Turkey, Belarus, India, Myanmar and China implemented brutal crackdowns on their media. Nearly 400 journalists and media workers were being held in detention at the end of 2020. That is a historically high level. The number of women journalists imprisoned in 2020 increased by one third.

At home, the UK is ranked 33rd out of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index, with our own record marred by restrictions on freedom of information, the detention of Wikileaks publisher Julian Assange, and active threats to the safety of journalists in Northern Ireland. These figures are shocking, and a concrete solution is desperately needed to reverse this dangerous trend. Will the Minister take up calls from the IFJ and media representatives on every continent for the establishment of a UN convention on the safety and protection of journalists, to ensure implementation of existing UN mechanisms, hold states accountable for their obligations, and end the impunity with which attacks on the press are currently conducted?

I will conclude by paying tribute to the bravery of journalists across the globe who work in dangerous circumstances to keep power in check. We must not mark World Press Freedom Day merely with words, but renew our efforts to ensure that threats to press freedoms everywhere are combated with decisive action, because press freedom protects us, and we must strive every day to protect press freedom.

2.21 pm

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ghani, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) on having secured today's debate. In the heart of Europe today, a brave young man named Roman Protasevich languishes in jail. His face is now familiar to all of us from a video he was forced to make by his thuggish captors: puffed and swollen from beatings and looking scared, he told us that he was being treated well. Journalism at its finest speaks truth to power; that is why tyrants the world over hate journalists. Lukashenko, the Belarusian dictator, was so desperate to silence Roman Protasevich that he was prepared to hijack a plane and force it to land in Minsk, the capital of his dark regime.

I am proud to be a journalist. It is all I ever wanted to be, so sometimes I am a little bit surprised to find myself here, offering opinions and certainties rather than asking questions. My dad remembers that as a kid, I used to lie on our tenement hall floor and read the broadsheets. Too wee to hold them, I would lay them flat and read them column by column, poring over reports from far-away, impossibly exotic places. I remember reading the fearless reporting from Vietnam, and also fearless

[John Nicolson]

journalism of a different type from Watergate. I loved the writing of Neal Ascherson, the taut forensic skill of Brian Walden, and the flamboyant showmanship of Robin Day. Charles Wheeler's lugubrious delivery heightened the brave passion of the civil rights movement. James Morris wrote about war as a man and then, as Jan, inspired as a woman, writing with grace about her transition.

I have done a bit of foreign affairs correspondence, and I have anchored some dramatic moments, none more memorable than the horrors of 11 September. I was on air when the twin towers were attacked, and had to find the words to describe the unspeakable brutality and cruelty of the unfolding events. I kept my cool, I think, during the hours of live broadcast, but I wept when I got home. Some of the images that we could not show that day, such as the people jumping from the towers, will be forever seared into my mind. However, my work has mostly been confined to political correspondence—a safe place for journalists, even at Westminster.

Journalists working elsewhere in the world have very different experiences. Reporters Without Borders reports that only 12 countries worldwide are rated “good” for press freedom. Almost three quarters of countries have constrained press freedom. Fifty journalists were killed last year, and 387 were held in detention, which is a historic high. Unsurprisingly, the worst offenders are the most brutal, despotic regimes, with Saudi Arabia and China leading the rogues' gallery. Fourteen journalists are currently detained for telling the truth about covid, and more than 1,000 have died of it.

Not only did the recent onslaught by Israel against the Palestinians trapped in the Gaza strip see the slaughter of 67 innocent children, who were killed outright or buried alive by bombs fired by a military superpower that claims that it uses precision bombing, but that same Israeli bombing campaign targeted journalistic outlets that were determined to report on the carnage. Israel—a country that describes itself as a western democracy—used fighter jets to bomb the building housing Associated Press and al-Jazeera in Gaza. No journalists in the building were killed, but we remember that in a previous Israeli onslaught in 2003, James Miller, a freelance Welsh cameraman, was killed by Israeli troops who continued to fire on him even after the reporter he was with shouted, “We are British journalists.” An inquest concluded that he had been murdered, but no Israeli soldiers were prosecuted.

There have been so many killings of journalists that it seems almost invidious to single out individuals, but we all remember Marie Colvin, the celebrated *Sunday Times* correspondent who was killed when Assad troops, who were almost certainly targeting her, shelled the building in Homs where she was sheltering as she covered the Syrian regime atrocities. Closer to home, it took the shooting of Lyra McKee by IRA thugs in Derry to get Northern Ireland's recalcitrant political leaders to issue a joint statement condemning her murder as an attack on the political process and democracy. Although Frank Gardner, the BBC security correspondent, survived an al-Qaeda attack, we are forever reminded of the price he paid when we see him on our screens, reporting uncomplainingly and with grace from a wheelchair. They are brave and fearless, every one of them. Armed only with a pen, microphone or camera, they were killed by cowards bombing and shooting from afar.

Of course, as we have heard, the threat to journalists takes many forms. The spread of disinformation through social media, and attacks on professional journalism, are perhaps the most insidious new ones. The lies disseminated by Putin and Assad, to spread disinformation about the murder of journalists and political opponents, to disguise their responsibility for gas attacks and to blacken the name of, among others, the White Helmets, are amplified online by the malevolent and the naive.

Here today, we honour a fine craft. I hope that, whatever our politics, we as parliamentarians resolve to affirm the right of journalists, whether at home or abroad, to scrutinise and examine, and to probe and uncover, without fear or favour.

2.28 pm

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ghani, and to follow what has been an excellent debate. In an unusual opening gambit for a shadow Minister, may I first pay tribute to the Minister who, in Opposition as well as in Government, has made this issue a priority? I know it is something that he really believes in.

I also pay tribute to my good friend, the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins), who gave a fantastic opening exposition. He spoke about news deserts, and other hon. Members also spoke about the problems of local news and media. He also mentioned the importance of not forgetting online news and disinformation, on which I know he has done so much work in the past. It was a fantastic introduction.

Let me say first of all that we have to get our own house in order, starting here in this place, in Westminster. Too often, there is a tendency to attack journalism. It is still a matter of shame for me that four or five years ago, Laura Kuenssberg felt that she had to have a bodyguard to attend the Labour party conference. Once again, I send my apologies to her for that. More recently, a Conservative Minister caused the Twitter pile-on of a journalist who was asking perfectly innocent questions, and we have heard some unhelpful comments from the Prime Minister attacking all journalists. We have got SNP Members who attack the BBC because they do not like the way it covered the independence referendum. Plenty of Conservative MPs are always undermining the BBC and calling it for it to be defunded. We have Democratic Unionist party MPs who have a beef with Stephen Nolan and attack the BBC and its integrity. Those attacks need to stop. By all means complain about individual broadcasts, but stop undermining independent journalism.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson) mentioned, the UK is ranked 33rd out of 180 countries in the 2021 World Press Freedom Index. Restrictions on freedom of information and active threats to the safety of journalists in Northern Ireland continue to mar the UK's press freedom record. We heard about the murder of Lyra McKee and her search for the truth. She was shot in 2019 during the riots that took place in Derry. It is truly shocking that on our shores journalists still face such a hostile environment.

The situation in Northern Ireland, incidentally, is becoming increasingly hostile. I heard recently the horrific story of Patricia Devlin, who has been subject to continuous and serious threats and abuse in recent years. In 2019, she reported receiving a Facebook message—I hesitate

to say this, but I will—that suggested threats of rape against her baby. That is to a journalist in the UK. In a case in Barrow-in-Furness, Amy Fenton was run out of town by far-right gangs. We still have something to do in the UK. We need to make that a priority.

The focus of the debate is international. Numerous hon. Members referred to the disgraceful case of Roman Protasevich, which, frankly, was an act of piracy by the Belarusian Government. To those who would suggest that Mr Protasevich is not a journalist but merely a citizen blogger, when all the press in Belarus is so tightly controlled and not independent, citizen bloggers become the only source of independent information and, as has been mentioned, an essential independent voice.

In the debate, we heard that the number of journalists being killed is at an all-time high, with 387 being detained and 50 journalists killed around the world in 2020. The hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe mentioned the gunning down of the three female media workers in Afghanistan. In fact, the past decade has been the deadliest one for the profession, with a total of 1,059 journalists killed in the past 10 years simply for doing their job. That has to stop. Every year, every statistic, has a human side—the death of a mother or father, a brother or sister, a community left without information, denied that human right to be properly informed.

Let us not forget that the threat does not come only from authoritarian Governments. My right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) talked about Mexico, a country that he knows well. Journalists have been murdered for investigating powerful organised crime groups and drug cartels. Reference was made to the murder of Daphne Caruana Galizia in Malta, with suggestions that elements of organised crime were working in concert with Governments. I ask the Minister for us to do more than simply condemn the detention and killing of journalists all around the world. More must be done to support those who are being silenced.

The BBC World Service does a fantastic job of projecting and promoting not just British values, but truthful and honest journalism. That is known throughout the world. Given those who say that we need to cut the BBC licence fee, I remind hon. Members in the Chamber and elsewhere that 70% of World Service funding comes from the licence fee—be careful what you wish for.

The BBC World Service is under threat. In China, the BBC World News TV channel has been banned by the Chinese authorities. In Hong Kong, the BBC World Service has been removed from the airwaves, after criticism of the BBC for its reporting on coronavirus and the persecution of the Uyghurs. World News distribution in mainland China was limited to international hotels; nevertheless, its loss is symbolically significant. John Sudworth, the BBC's China correspondent whose reporting exposed truths about the Xinjiang detention camps, including sexual violence against Uyghur women, has now had to move to Taiwan, following pressure and threats from the Chinese authorities.

In Myanmar, BBC Burmese correspondent Aung Thura was taken away and detained along with a colleague towards the end of March, while reporting outside the court in the capital. The licences of media companies have been revoked and nightly internet shutdowns have been used to restrict news coverage and access to information.

Russia is also becoming an increasingly hostile environment for journalists. In recent years, many independent news organisations have closed down or curtailed their operations. Legislation governing the media is extensive and strict. The Russian authorities have made it clear that any action taken against the Russian state-backed TV channel RT in the UK will result in similar measures being taken against the BBC in Russia. Of course, there is the problem of the continuing harassment of BBC Persian staff, and their families, by Iran. It is deeply troubling and continues to escalate. The Iranian authorities have targeted Persian journalists, the BBC and their families since the service launched satellite television in 2009. Intimidation of the family members of BBC Persian staff in Iran is a regular occurrence. This takes various forms, including arrests, detention, questioning, threats that jobs or pensions will be lost, confiscation of passports and asset freezes. I ask the Minister to reflect on the situation of BBC Persian journalists, and ensure that they and their families in this country and abroad are safe.

I refer briefly to the question on the bombing of the news premises in Gaza, mentioned by my hon. Friends the Members for Leicester East (Claudia Webbe) and for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson), my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North and many others. What happened is an absolute outrage. The building was deliberately targeted and that cannot be allowed without massive criticism of the Israeli air force.

Finally, I reflect on an increasingly problematic matter, mentioned by the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe, the question of SLAPPs—an acronym that I think came first and the words to fill it after—strategic lawsuits against public participation. It is a real problem. Legal threats against journalists are far from a new phenomenon. Yet increasingly, media outlets and freelance journalists—even those with no links to the UK—report receiving letters from London law firms acting on behalf of the people they are investigating. The high costs and long time periods involved in fighting legal threats in the UK pile significant pressure on individual journalists or media outlets to withdraw or refrain from publishing their investigations, even if they believe them to be accurate and in the public interest. Taken usually by powerful or wealthy individuals and entities, the intention is not to address a genuine grievance, but to stifle investigations into matters of public interest through intimidation, and by consuming the target's financial and psychological resources.

These types of vexatious legal threats can also come hand in hand with orchestrated smear campaigns, offline surveillance and other forms of harassment against journalists. Some of the recent examples include lawsuits filed by Russian billionaires against Catherine Belton; by the allies of the Malaysian Prime Minister against Clare Rewcastle Brown; and a lawsuit filed against OCCRP and its co-founder Paul Radu, by an Azerbaijani politician. Perhaps even more shocking is the involvement of UK legal companies who actively advertise such services to their clients. The UK is the leading international source of these threats, almost equivalent to those stemming from EU countries and the US combined.

To protect media freedom at home and abroad, the UK must take action to address two interlinked trends—first, the role that London continues to hold as an international libel capital, despite reforms to English

[*Christian Matheson*]

and Welsh law in 2013, and the impact of such legal action, or even the threat of it, in the UK on journalists around the world; and secondly, the impact that the UK's facilitation through its financial and legal systems of illicit finance links to political elites in countries with poor democratic records has on media freedom there. It is not surprising that countries with higher rates of corruption tend to have the fewest protections for journalists and the media. The so-called SLAPPs damage the UK's reputation as a haven for free speech, and I urge the Minister to look into that issue.

It is clear that press and media freedoms are under threat around the world. For a country that is part of the global Media Freedom Coalition, there is a long way to go to promote and protect press freedom. I know that the National Union of Journalists advises that there should be a new convention, which is stronger than the demand solely for a special representative. A new convention would systemise and detail existing obligations, enhance the visibility of the journalists and the protection required for journalism, and codify multiple texts into one comprehensive document. We need to value journalists and their contribution, protect their livelihoods and stand up for universal rights and freedoms, democracy and the rule of law everywhere, and against violations wherever they take place. That must support freedom of expression, and specifically media freedoms.

2.39 pm

The Minister for Media and Data (Mr John Whittingdale):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ghani. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) on securing the debate and on his work to promote media freedom. I am particularly grateful to him for taking over as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on media freedom, which I chaired until February 2020.

A lot of Members have focused on dreadful abuses of media freedom in different countries around the world, and so to some extent Members might have expected a response from a Foreign Office Minister. The Minister who has specific responsibility for the subject is my noble Friend Lord Ahmad, the Minister for South Asia and the Commonwealth, who is doing a great job championing media freedom internationally. He is obviously prevented from taking part in this debate in our House, but I work with him closely.

It is encouraging that there has been widespread recognition across this Chamber that media freedom is a crucial component of an open, democratic society. We may not always like or agree with what is written about us in the press, but the role of a free media in holding Government to account, in exposing corruption or malpractice and in providing trusted, reliable information and reporting has never been more important. However, media freedom is under increasing threat across the world. A number of Members pointed out that 50 journalists were killed last year while doing their job. According to Reporters Without Borders, which does a terrific job of monitoring that and campaigning, already this year 13 more journalists or media assistants have been killed, and there are currently 439 in prison. The summary analysis of its World Press Freedom Index 2021, published in April, said that journalism is completely or partly

blocked in 73% of the 180 countries ranked in the index; that the coronavirus pandemic has been used by Governments as cover for blocking journalists' access to information; and that journalists find it increasingly hard to investigate and report sensitive stories, especially in Asia, the middle east and Europe.

I join a number of those who have contributed in paying tribute to the courage of journalists working in some of the most difficult, dangerous and challenging parts of the world. The hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson) reminded us of our own Marie Colvin, who was killed in Syria along with her photographer, French journalist Rémi Ochlik, in 2012. I am sure he heard, as I have, Paul Conroy, who was also badly injured at that time, talk about how the shelling that killed Marie Colvin and her colleague was deliberately aimed at them because they were journalists.

It is because media freedom is so important that the Government have championed the cause of media freedom around the world. As has been mentioned, in July 2019 the UK hosted the Global Conference for Media Freedom, which led to the establishment of the Media Freedom Coalition of like-minded countries that pledged to collaborate to improve the media freedom environment across the world. The UK continues to co-chair the coalition. It is still a relatively young body, but it is growing and currently has 47 members. This year the coalition has already issued statements about China, Belarus and Myanmar, as well as a statement marking World Press Freedom Day. We are working on giving the coalition more impact on the ground by encouraging local collaboration in countries with those who are better able to engage with Governments and lobby them directly.

A number of countries have been mentioned, but I think it is important to speak about the most recent appalling example of the danger faced by journalists, which is of course the hijacking of an aeroplane and then the detention of Roman Protasevich in Belarus. In 2018, I led an Inter-Parliamentary Union delegation to Belarus. There was no question: the country was not democratic or free, and journalism was under terrific pressure. We met independent journalists operating there. Reporters Without Borders has assessed Belarus as the most dangerous country in Europe for media actors. I am pleased that the Government are supporting independent media organisations in that country, and we have already committed £2.7 million of support for independent media in Belarus. Alongside the Government, the IPU has been very active in championing media freedom and organising conferences, and I can remember listening to the relatives of journalists operating for the BBC's Persian Service. The Persian Service is not able to operate in Iran. Its journalists broadcast from London on the BBC, but their relatives in Iran are being subjected to harassment and intimidation. We will continue to highlight that and to put pressure on the Iranian Government to respect their freedom.

As I said, the World Press Freedom Index, which several Members have referred to and which was published in April, showed that the UK had risen by two places, to No. 33. It is obviously good news that we have gone up in the rankings, but to some extent that is because other countries have gone down. It demonstrates that we undoubtedly still have a lot of work to do. The death of Lyra McKee, a journalist in Belfast, is happily a very

rare example of where a journalist in this country has lost their life in the course of their work, but there is no question that journalists in the UK still suffer dreadful harassment and abuse.

The hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) mentioned Amy Fenton. I have met and talked to her about the abuse that occurred, which led her to have to seek police protection. It was for that reason that we established the National Committee for the Safety of Journalists, which brings together senior figures from law enforcement, the police, the prosecuting authorities, the campaigning organisations, the Government, and both the Society of Editors and the National Union of Journalists. The aim was to demonstrate a shared commitment to ensure that journalists are free to carry out their vital role without threats of violence.

We have now published the first ever national action plan for the safety of journalists, which sets out the actions that all the partners will take to protect journalists. Every police force will have a dedicated officer to whom journalists can make a complaint, or whom they can contact in the event of abuse against them. The police will be trained, particularly about the importance of safeguarding journalists. Employers will provide extra training, and the platforms where a lot of the abuse occurs have said that they will establish designated journalism safety officers.

There is still more to be done, and one of the first things that we want to do is to get more evidence about the scale of the problem. We will shortly be publishing the call for evidence, and I hope that any journalist operating in the UK who has suffered in such a way will respond to it. I am delighted that our work on that has already been praised at the Stockholm Conference on Media Freedom in the OSCE region, and has perhaps contributed to the promotion in the ranking of the UK on the World Press Freedom Index.

In response to my right hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale), I can confirm that the UK is using our presidency of the G7 to highlight the importance of media freedom. We will be asking G7 members to reconfirm their commitment to defend media freedom and to provide practical, technical and programmatic support to journalists and media, including through the global media defence fund. The fund was set up with the help of the UK and UNESCO, which currently manages it, and we continue to support it. In 2019, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office pledged £3 million to the fund over the next five years, and we are delivering on that commitment. To date, the fund has supported a variety of activities, such as pursuing strategic litigation with the goal of challenging laws and regulations that infringe on media freedom in Zanzibar, and investigative journalism that is focused on cases of threatened, prosecuted, imprisoned, attacked or assassinated journalists in the Philippines.

I thank the High Level Panel of Legal Experts on Media Freedom for its contribution to international efforts to promote media freedom. We are now working through all the recommendations of its report, with a view to responding.

Just before I finish, I will touch on an issue raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe and by the right hon. Member for Islington North—the threat to sustainable journalism, especially traditional media, as a result of the growth of social media and the

power of the online platforms. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight that issue; it is a matter of considerable concern. As he well knows, we have received a number of reports highlighting the need for action. He will also be aware that we recently established the Digital Markets Unit in the Competition and Markets Authority, which will bring in mandatory codes of conduct to ensure that the relationship between publishers—in other words, media—and the platforms is not abused by the over-dominance and anti-competitive practice of the platforms.

There is still a lot of work to do, but I am determined that this country should address the concerns that have been rightly expressed today about what happens in the UK, and I am also determined that we should continue to champion media freedom wherever it is under threat across the world. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe for giving us the opportunity to show that this House is united in that ambition.

2.51 pm

Damian Collins: Thank you for calling me again, Ms Ghani.

I thank all Members for their participation in what has been a really excellent debate. We have heard many harrowing stories of attacks on individual journalists, many of whom have lost their lives, for seeking to speak truth to power, to make citizens aware of abuses of power, and to campaign for change.

In my 11 years as a Member of Parliament, I can think of so many issues that I have been involved with, personally or as a member or Chair of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, and coverage of so many of them was initiated by the work of investigative journalists, bringing to the attention of Parliament and politicians serious issues that needed to be addressed. So journalism is a vital part of a vibrant democracy, and we should take any attack against the media and journalism anywhere in the world incredibly seriously.

A number of Members, and indeed the Minister, too, raised the serious challenges that exist in the digital world. As the Minister said, it is right that we create the infrastructure to safeguard journalism in the future, through the operation of the draft Online Safety Bill and in particular through the Digital Markets Unit, to ensure that there is not an abuse of market power that will undermine media and could effectively turn journalism into a behind-closed-doors product that a few people pay for but many citizens are simply not exposed to at all. That would be a terrible outcome.

The final point that I will make, which I and others—particularly the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson)—made during the debate, is the important one about abuse of the legal system in the UK to shut down legitimate journalism and legitimate inquiry with lengthy and expensive lawsuits. We have seen examples of that and it is another important area where we need to safeguard journalism in the UK, too.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered World Press Freedom Day 2021.

2.53 pm

Sitting suspended.

Green Homes Grant Voucher Scheme

[Mr Laurence Robertson *in the Chair*]

[Relevant documents: Third Report of the Environmental Audit Committee, Session 2019–21, Energy efficiency of existing homes, HC 346, and the Government response, HC 135; Oral evidence taken before the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee on 9 February, 16 March and 20 April 2021, on Decarbonising heat in homes, HC 851; Written evidence to the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, on Decarbonising heat in homes, reported to the House on 5 February, and 13, 27 and 29 April 2021, HC 851; Oral evidence taken before the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee on 13 April 2021, on Work of the Department and Government response to Coronavirus, HC 301.]

3.18 pm

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): Sorry for the slight delay due to technical problems. I ask Members attending physically whether they would not mind cleaning their spaces before they use them and as they leave the room. I remind Members that Mr Speaker has stated that masks should be worn in Westminster Hall other than when speaking.

Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con) [V]: I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of the Green Homes Grant voucher scheme.

It is a pleasure to serve under you, Mr Robertson, albeit remotely. Apologies if I am improperly dressed. I thank the Chairman of Ways and Means for allowing the debate to take place, because it was postponed as a result of Prorogation happening a day earlier than previously planned. I am grateful for that flexibility. I am moving the motion because, as Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee, I have a particular interest in energy efficiency and the contribution that it needs to make to enable the country to meet our net zero obligations.

The green homes grant scheme was announced with some fanfare in July last year by the Chancellor of the Exchequer as the centrepiece of the economic package of emergency measures to aid our economic recovery from covid. It was announced as a £1.5 billion scheme, not previously flagged as part of the manifesto commitment from the previous general election, with a very welcome ambition to improve 600,000 homes by March 2021 and in so doing create some 100,000 jobs.

The scheme did not open for applications until late September last year, which in itself led to an unfortunate hiatus in orders for energy efficiency improvements, as householders intending to proceed with some improvements stalled orders while they awaited the prospect of grant funding. The financial grants on offer to install energy efficiency measures and some types of low-carbon heating such as heat pumps were capped at £5,000 per property but up to £10,000 for fuel-poor households—but accessing the grants proved extremely difficult. I am sure others will come to that.

In November, the green homes grant scheme was extended for a further year to March 2022 due to the demand for applications. That was welcome, because one of the shortcomings of the scheme had been its short duration. The scheme was intended to mobilise the energy-efficiency supply chain, but as a consequence

of intrinsic problems in its application and implementation, it had a perverse impact, with several installation companies seeking to use the scheme having to lay off staff because of the difficulties consumers had had in gaining access to it.

Prior to the voucher scheme's closure in March this year, it had received more than 113,000 applications—10 times as many as under the coalition Government's green deal—so it was clear that there was demand. By 5 May, the last date for which statistics have been published, some 57,500 vouchers had been issued and 15,500 measures had been installed. Some 1,880 installation companies had expressed interest in becoming accredited under the scheme, but only 1,021 were classed as active, so barely half of those installers who had been interested in participating in the scheme had done so. I suspect that was in large part due to the varying uncertainties surrounding the scheme.

The Environmental Audit Committee held an inquiry on the energy efficiency of existing homes, which we launched in May last year—before the scheme had been announced—and concluded in March, a week before the scheme was scrapped. I am pleased to see my excellent Committee colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker), in his place for the debate; I look forward to his contribution. The Committee made recommendations about necessary improvements to the scheme. We wanted to see it overhauled and, crucially, extended to make it more effective. We certainly did not want to see it scaled back or scrapped. I will not dwell on the shortcomings of the scheme any more than I have already—they were manifest, and I am sure others will point out some of the specific challenges—but focus my remarks on what is needed in the future.

It is hard to overstate the scale of the challenge presented by the need to improve the energy efficiency of our homes. The UK has one of the least efficient housing stocks in Europe. Domestic properties account for almost a fifth of the UK's carbon emissions. There are 29 million homes across the UK, 19 million of which do not meet the energy performance certificate C rating. Even those that do, in many cases, do so without effective insulation and so could do better. The Climate Change Committee has said that the UK's legally binding climate change targets will not be met without the near-complete elimination of greenhouse gas emissions from UK building stock by 2050.

Failure to address, with urgency, the energy efficiency of the country's homes could seriously jeopardise our emissions, now enshrined in statute to be net zero by 2050. The Government know that, having been elected on a manifesto that allocated £9.2 billion to be spent during this Parliament on improving heat in buildings, only a third of which has been allocated now that the green homes grant scheme has been ended. The funding needs to be deployed in new, more flexible, more enduring and more realistic schemes, as I shall touch on when I conclude my remarks.

The task is colossal. In England alone, more than 10 million owner-occupied homes and more than 3 million private rented sector landlords need to upgrade the energy efficiency of their homes to become at least EPC C rated by 2035. In the Government response to our report, the suggestion was made that the target will be brought forward to around 2030. I would just like the scale of that to sink in with the Minister, who I know is

not normally responsible for this area. If that acceleration were to happen, 13.6 million homes in England would require retrofitting over nine years. That is equivalent to 1.5 million properties a year or 125,000 properties a month, each and every month between, say, the end of this year and the end of 2030.

This will be at the same time as the construction industry, which is by and large responsible for this work, is supposed to be delivering 300,000 new homes a year. For context, I should say that the green homes grant scheme achieved 15,500 installations in six months. That is a fraction of what would be required every month from now until the end of the period.

The good news is that this is a colossal business opportunity, including for many small and medium-sized enterprises, for whom, as small business Minister, my hon. Friend has responsibility. For contractors to seize this opportunity, they need to have their confidence restored that the Government have a coherent plan, with support available, to be clearly established once the domestic renewable heat incentive scheme ends next March, which is currently the only scheme available.

The Government have been dropping hints that they will mandate energy efficiency at the point of sale or renovation of a property. We expect that to be spelled out in the heat in buildings strategy. Homeowners need support to get there. I would find it very challenging for the Government if minimum standards of energy efficiency were brought in for owner-occupiers without some financial support, given the scale of work required. It is not just buying a heat pump; it requires significant insulation, in particular to properties that are in isolated rural locations. Rural, stand-alone or elderly properties are often much harder to insulate with a retrofit and it is therefore more expensive. If no support is available, there is a genuine risk of blight on millions of homes.

What can we learn from the green homes grant scheme? Demand for the scheme was there. Our Committee received no evidence that covid was causing a problem, which at one point the Government hinted at. That was evidenced in the consumer survey that the Committee conducted: covid was not referenced as a problem at all. The good news is that there is demand there from homeowners.

The Government redirected some of the green homes grant funding to the local authority delivery scheme, which is welcome, but it will not reach all those who need help as only some local authorities have had successful bids. It may not help SMEs in the sector, where support for jobs is needed, since local authorities will often award projects to larger construction companies or to their own in-house workforces.

An example is E.ON, which recruited some 100 permanent roles to deliver the local authority scheme. That is good for those who were employed, but it does not help SMEs. We need to see support available to homeowners across the country—and with it, jobs. Bringing all homes up to EPC C would achieve more than the 100,000 jobs that the Government were talking about; one of our witnesses at the Committee, the Energy Efficiency Infrastructure Group, indicated that it would support 150,000 jobs from the moment it began.

I want to see a long-term replacement—certainly five years and preferably 10 years—for the green homes grant scheme. It should be funded as one of the spending review announcements. A replacement scheme needs to

be as free of bureaucracy as possible, consistent—obviously—with the need to beware of the risk of fraud. Government and industry need to work together to design a scheme. Sadly, that was not the case with the green homes grant scheme from the point of inception. The scheme needs to be long-term to give the right signals to the sector, to train the people required to do the work, and to enable them to have confidence that they can afford the accreditation process.

Above all, the scheme needs to be easy for the public to understand. It needs to cover a simple hierarchy of measures and to be flexible enough to cope with the individual requirements of individual properties. No two properties are identical, and the notion of having two different tiers—in which some work has to be completed under one tier before being able to move on to the other—was far too complicated and put many people off.

The Government should look to other solutions to improve domestic energy efficiency. In our report, our Committee called for a reduction in VAT on renovations that improve energy efficiency. That would be a simple way to incentivise work. We already have zero rating on new homes, so why not zero or 5%, depending on the item, for those that need improving as well?

We feel that the Treasury has taken a sceptical approach to such measures. It ruled out changes to VAT or stamp duty rebates, which is another suggestion made by industry that we think has significant scope: the rebate would be spent on getting the building up to energy efficiency standards. The UK Green Building Council published a report this week containing a revenue-neutral proposal for just that: a stamp duty rebate to encourage energy efficiency, and I strongly urge the Minister to encourage his colleagues at the Treasury to look at such a scheme.

We welcome the fact that the Government are working with lenders for green mortgages. That has real potential, and there is a lot of enthusiasm in the mortgage industry for attaching green mortgages to their product portfolio. Again, we need to be wary that if we raise standards without providing support or mechanisms to allow people to improve their properties, potential buyers of properties that do not meet the standard may not get access to mortgages. That could have a significant impact on those properties' value. The Government should also look to the national infrastructure bank to provide finance. The Government have said that the bank's remit will be established this summer, and we hope that this will be included within it.

I will touch briefly on the energy performance certificate regime. The certificates were originally designed to provide a basic indicator of the energy cost of running a home, but they now underpin a range of Government policies and targets—including not only the legally binding fuel poverty targets, but the ambition to have as many homes as possible at grade C by 2035 or earlier, as indicated by me, and the minimum energy efficiency standard for private homes.

EPCs have a range of flaws, as was demonstrated to me by an assessor who I met last week. I asked to be taken through how the algorithm works. It is now undertaken through a centralised Government website, where the assessor puts in the parameters of the property and out comes the result. Just to illustrate to Members how perplexing this is, for a rural three-bedroom cottage currently fuelled by domestic heating oil in my constituency,

[Philip Dunne]

where we had all the details, replacing that heating oil with a heat pump and doing nothing else would increase the EPC rating by two points. It is necessary to move by nine or 10 points in order to move up a rating, so doing so barely moves the dial on its own.

The EPC rating penalises off-grid and rural homes in particular, as too much weighting is given to fuel costs. If a person is on a domestic heating oil system because that is the cheapest method of heating their home, but they then introduce energy efficiency measures, that does not move the rating, and they cannot adopt a non-fossil fuel system if it is more expensive. The EPC methodology is therefore not addressing the fundamental challenge, so we recommend that it is fundamentally overhauled to support low-carbon heating measures by indicating in its headline rating not only the fuel cost of heating a property, but its energy and carbon metrics. This must be done before we set minimum efficiency standards for homes. Eye-catching top-line targets for heat pump installations are welcome, and raising minimum energy performance standards for homes is all very well, but what is desperately needed is a coherent plan to achieve the targets that are being set.

Homeowners need to be made aware of the benefits for the planet, but also for their pocket, as reduced energy demand will reduce energy bills. They need to be given the confidence to invest in energy efficiency and low-carbon heating. My Committee and I remain of the view that a replacement scheme for the green homes grant is needed, and that this should be announced and funded in the next spending review.

This replacement scheme will need to endure for several years and be free of bureaucratic obstacles. Alongside that, an overhaul of energy performance certificates is needed to make sure that progress towards decarbonising our homes is not penalised. The Government's recent response to our report frankly raises the stakes for the heat in buildings strategy, which is due to be published; it has been much delayed, and we would like to see it published as soon as possible. We very much hope that we will not be disappointed by that strategy, and that tangible action to implement it, backed up by Treasury funding, is taken as soon as possible after its publication.

3.38 pm

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Robertson. Before I begin, I declare an interest: my wife works for the Association for Decentralised Energy.

Today's debate is a timely one, not just because of its necessary focus on the failures of the green homes grant scheme and the lessons we should draw, but because of the foundational importance of energy efficiency to the success of our net zero targets. It was therefore a pleasure to sponsor the debate application, and I commend the right hon. Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne) on his and his Committee's leadership on this issue. His Committee was instrumental in highlighting concerns about this scheme earlier this year, and I am grateful for the seriousness and detail of their ongoing work in this area, not least in opening today's debate.

We on the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee are nearing the end of a major inquiry looking directly at how Britain can meet the challenges

posed by decarbonising heat in our homes, in addition to monitoring our overall progress as a country in meeting our net zero targets at home as we seek to lead abroad by example at COP. There is little point decarbonising the heating in our buildings if those buildings are not energy efficient, and we will not meet our net zero targets if we do not decarbonise how we heat our homes, so these issues are inextricably linked. Those decarbonisation targets present huge opportunities for citizens right across the country, from reducing our energy bills at home and making our homes more comfortable to live in to creating consumer demand for small and large businesses in every community, and creating green jobs for the workers who will be needed to go into each and every one of our homes over the decade ahead.

That was the key impetus behind the green homes grant scheme announcement when it was unveiled last year, and rightly so. It is therefore critically important that the grant scheme's failure, and that of its predecessor initiatives, does not put paid to that ambition but provides us with an opportunity to reflect and reboot. At the same time, the scale of the green homes grant debacle—which, as has been pointed out, the Government scrapped after enabling fewer than 6,000 installations, or less than 1% of its stated target—underlined the importance of fully investigating its failings to ensure that they are not repeated.

The right hon. Member for Ludlow and his Committee drew out in welcome detail how a panoply of design flaws led to an approvals framework that proved burdensome for builders and installers, impenetrable to homeowners, and saw installations run up against regulatory muddle and paralysing delays. Shipping out the delivery of the scheme to the lowest pay provider was neither realistic nor sensible, and realising the importance and capacity of local authorities to deliver better than Whitehall in my view is key.

Too easily, however, that experience could give way to miserablism and receding ambition, so as we interrogate the causes of the scheme's failure, I will stress the importance of getting back on track quickly. Lifting energy efficiency standards in homes remains the key short-term measure of success in decarbonising, not only because the quality of our existing buildings is often so inadequate but because real progress is feasibly deliverable, with the Climate Change Committee putting the per-home cost at under £10,000.

In spite of that, our progress to date in decarbonising buildings has stalled, with emission reductions in the sector sitting stagnant for more than a decade. The single biggest impediment to substantial private sector investment, however—most importantly, to remedy Britain's skills shortfall in this area, which continues to put a ceiling on our capacity to deliver—remains the Government's hesitancy.

Last month, my Committee heard evidence about the kind of time and financial outlay that smaller businesses confront in getting accredited to take on those jobs. For businesses to believe that such investments are justified, it is incumbent on Ministers to provide certainty that the Government will be in it for the long haul. We have seen far too many false starts. It is past time for a properly funded strategy, sustained over the coming decade and beyond, and I therefore associate myself with the calls of the right hon. Member for Ludlow.

In that spirit, my biggest worry is that the green homes grant experience typifies the pervasive lack of strategy running through the Government's attitude to climate policy. The fanfare that accompanied the scheme's unveiling last year was of a piece with a now-typical approach: far-reaching targets, soaring rhetoric, but a failure to follow through. Targets, however ambitious, are no substitute for delivery. The scheme's premature demise is an object lesson in the importance of getting the basics right.

I am confident that we can rise to that challenge, and create a sense of hope and opportunity for the British people as we move towards our net zero target, but we must be honest with ourselves, learn the lessons and step up to meet that challenge in the first place. I hope that the debate, the work of the respective Select Committees and the preparation of Ministers to put forward a replacement for the green homes grant in advance of the Budget later this year provide the space and opportunity to get this right once and for all.

3.43 pm

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson.

The debate is an important one, because when we talk about climate change, we tend to focus a lot more on transport than we do on buildings, and yet buildings are our second biggest cause of emissions. Domestic buildings are 30% of our energy use and 19% of our emissions overall.

Ultimately, I would like to see more of what I have in my constituency, from Greencore Construction, which has built homes that are net zero in both build and use. It sold them to housing associations at the same price they would pay for other houses. It has continued to innovate and, with recent modifications, reduced the carbon emissions by a further 40%. Those are now carbon-positive homes. I have taken the Secretary of State for BEIS and others to see them, because what the company is doing is really impressive. In July, it will be talking at my pre-COP summit for Wantage and Didcot constituents.

More broadly, I welcome the commitment on the future homes standard to reduce the amount of emissions by 75% to 80%. That is very positive but, again, that is about new homes and we know we have an issue with the homes that have already been built.

I was excited by the green homes grant scheme. I was excited by the ambition to make homes more energy-efficient. I was also excited by the jobs that I hoped it would stimulate in the supply chain. I was very disappointed when it was cancelled due, at least in part, to lack of take-up, although there were clearly other issues with it.

We have a heat and building strategy coming. We will have to see what is in that—I hope it will tackle some of the issues we are discussing—but as of today, I would support another scheme. I will quickly offer some observations on things that I have seen as a constituency MP which we would need to retain or change if we were to have a new scheme.

First, I thought it was really important that we gave more financial support to low-income households. That is the fairness aspect that shines through in the Climate Assembly report. We do not want policy decisions and judgments to be made by the most affluent in society;

we should not judge everything that those on low incomes are doing without giving them the support to make changes that they may well want to but just do not have the means to make.

Secondly, price hikes very definitely took place once the scheme had been announced. Constituents wrote to me to say, "I know what that should cost because I looked at the price last week, and suddenly it has gone up." I am not sure that there is a lot the Government can do about that—they had price guidelines for applications to the scheme. I suspect this kind of thing always happens, but I think it would be positive if we did whatever we could to avoid price hikes.

Thirdly, there was debate about the kitemark. I defended the use of the kitemark for the tradesmen, because it is important that we do not have cowboy tradesmen—for want of a better term—doing shoddy work. I know there is a debate about whether TrustMark was the right one for this. Maybe it was not, but I think it is important to have that kitemark.

Fourthly, there is a broader issue—not just for this scheme but for our strategy as a whole—relating to historic listed buildings. I have four towns in my constituency, but 64 villages. The homes that are built in Didcot are of varying quality, but they are new, whereas the homes in the villages are often protected in various ways and face a whole bucket of issues. Many of the people in those villages are keen to make their own contributions to combating climate change, but there is a range of things that we have not yet got to grips with, from the fact that some of those homes can use only oil for their heating because they are off the gas grid, to whether they are allowed to have solar panels. There is also lime rendering, which was something about which I did not know very much, but which certain types of home need as part of the insulation process. That can only be done at certain times of the year, and there are not many tradesmen who can do it.

Those things feed into the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne): if we are going to have another scheme, it needs to be over a long enough time period that we can get those things right. We need to make sure that prices are not hiked too much, that we are using the right kitemark, and that tradesmen see it as in their interests to get that kitemark because of the length of time that it will cover. We also need the scheme to cover enough seasons that those things that can be done only at certain times of the year can be included. We might even train more people who have experience with older, historic buildings, because that issue left rural areas at a considerable disadvantage in the short timeframe the scheme was to be designed to cover.

We will probably still spend a lot more time talking about the cars we drive and the plane journeys we take, but unless we can make the progress we need to make on buildings, we will continue to hamstring our ability to tackle our net zero goals.

3.49 pm

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I thank the right hon. Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne) for securing this important debate. I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

[*Mick Whitley*]

In the summer of 2020, I joined Members from across the House, along with trade unions, industry leaders and environmental groups, in welcoming the announcement of the green homes grants scheme. It represented a welcome opportunity to support the construction industry at a time of immense economic hardship, to slash energy costs and tackle the scourge of fuel poverty, and to create thousands of high-quality jobs in left-behind communities such as my constituency of Birkenhead.

Less than a year later, however, the scheme has been consigned to the scrapheap and businesses have been left to pay the price. Ministerial infighting and bureaucratic incompetence has doomed to abject failure what was supposed to be a shovel-ready project. Of the £1.5 billion originally allotted, around £1.4 billion has gone unspent, and a measly £300 million has been reallocated to the local authority delivery scheme. Instead of creating the 100,000 jobs that were promised, the TUC estimates that the scrapping of the green homes grant will cost 13,000 jobs across the north west, in a shameful betrayal of the very work of small businesses that the scheme was supposed to support.

We should not be surprised. The scrapping of the scheme is just the latest in a long line of Government failures to live up to promises on climate change—failures that have left the UK widely off course to meet both our fourth and fifth carbon budgets. If we are serious about tackling climate breakdown, we need urgent action to reduce household emissions. However, this is not just about the environment. The retrofitting of homes and the transition to low-carbon heating systems such as heat pumps and hydrogen boilers also has a vital role to play in delivering on the Chancellor's promise of a green jobs revolution and creating badly-needed jobs in towns such as Birkenhead, which for far too long have suffered a chronic shortage of work and training opportunities.

It is imperative that the Government now reflect on the many failings of the green homes grant scheme and get us back on track to meeting our targets for retrofitting homes. That means working with industry leaders and local authorities to design a plan that is both ambitious and achievable and puts job creation and training opportunities for young people at its heart.

3.51 pm

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. It is also an honour to speak in the debate called by the excellent Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne), and I am delighted to support him here today.

With every good intention, the Government launched this scheme to a fanfare, as we have heard, in September 2020. Of course, one has to applaud the efforts to help households improve their energy efficiency, placing them at the centre to decarbonise our homes. However, there is no doubt that the scheme has been beset with problems. The take-up has been well short of any expectations, but then, as they say, hindsight is a wonderful thing.

Launching a scheme without having anywhere near enough approved installers—as we heard, just 1,021 active companies—meant that the issues under the green homes

grant quickly became apparent. My constituency office has tried to help many people who struggled to access the grants. It did not help, obviously, that we had further lockdowns and an apparent reluctance of homeowners to see installers come into their homes. However, that finding was not included in our Environmental Audit Committee report. We will give the benefit to the Government on that, and I know that they cannot be blamed for those further issues, but we did not see evidence of that.

I welcomed the drive to create jobs with the scheme, especially in the construction and property renovation sector that drives a lot of our economy. The drive to improve the energy efficiency of low-income households, reduce fuel poverty and work to phase out high-carbon fossil fuel heating is all laudable. Decarbonising our homes is a key priority in the race to net zero, and through the 10-point plan for a green industrial revolution and the energy White Paper, the Government have set out how they plan to decarbonise our buildings. However, I want to make a point here about a preoccupation with retrofitting, which has led to my Environmental Audit Committee inquiry into the sustainability of the build environment. The green homes grant is focused on reducing carbon emissions in the operating efficiency of an existing home, but we have hardly touched on the build environment. The materials that we use in the construction sector account for 11% of emissions that contribute to climate change. Concrete and steel production is dreadful for the environment. We need to look at more sustainable materials such as engineered wood and other more organic materials, which are far more prevalent in Europe. It is my hope that my inquiry will shine a light on that.

I wish that in the green homes grant scheme conception the use of natural materials such as lambs' wool insulation had been given far greater weight. Natural materials are growing in prominence, but the Government must further incentivise consumers to drive their take-up. The green homes grant could have been the perfect launchpad to do this, which is why I welcome one of our findings—that consumers should be incentivised with a VAT cut.

I applaud every intention of the scheme. I recognise, with fairness, its shortcomings. Some of them could have been foreseen; some should have been foreseen; and some were exacerbated by extraordinary circumstances. Nevertheless the intentions and the lessons are valuable. The idea behind the scheme was not a bad one, but schemes involving vouchers—I should know this from being an ex-retailer—sometimes take a long time to bed in. We must have people ready to go.

So, having learned those lessons, I hope that instead of scrapping the scheme entirely, there is the appetite for another attempt, learning from where we went wrong. If we are to get anywhere near the targets that we need to reach with our homes, the incentives in the scheme must be kept going. The findings of the EAC need heeding, because the demand was there; that was proved. Reducing VAT is a very strong idea and I again echo the thoughts of the Chairman of the EAC in saying to the Minister, "Let's try to extend the scheme, rather than have a full-scale scrapping of it".

3.56 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Robertson; I think that I do so for the first time.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne) on securing this hugely important debate, on his Committee's leadership on this issue, and on keeping alive the idea and the ambition of the green homes grant. I hope that there will be many future conversations about it, and that this will not be the end of it; I hope that the green homes grant will not slip away silently without our learning from it.

I think there is also some cross-party agreement here, which I always welcome. There is agreement about the need for the scheme; a general welcoming of the scheme's ambition; agreement about the need to learn from and improve on the scheme; and agreement about the need to bring it back in some form. I hope that this debate will contribute to its return.

Like other Members, several constituents have contacted me after trying and failing to get a green homes grant. One of them wanted to have improvements in tier two but not in tier one, so they really wanted to make a change to their house, which was very commendable, but they could not get into the scheme. And others, in trying to access it, had to go back three times for new quotes. Thankfully, they were very persistent—they really wanted to do this—but they still have not heard about their application, despite making it in early October. That shows some of the frustrations that have arisen, and that the scheme was set up with barriers inside it that stopped it from working. I will go on to say more about those barriers.

In total, 40% of UK carbon emissions come from UK households, with over half coming from heating and electricity. As the Committee on Climate Change has made clear, those emissions need to be reduced by 44% by 2030 if we are to meet the UK's fifth carbon budget. As was said earlier, that is a huge challenge.

If we look at the 15,500 successful applicants to the scheme in the six months that it was running, and if we look at the 10 million owner-occupied homes that need to be retrofitted and brought up to environmental standards, we can see that at that rate it will take us 323 years to deliver the change we need. In a climate emergency, we simply do not have that time.

Last month, I held an all-party parliamentary group on sustainable resource roundtable with leaders from the energy and buildings industries, company leaders and other representatives, to get their views on the ending of the grant and what we can learn from it. They were incredibly disappointed at its closure and believe that we need it back as soon as possible, so there is willingness from the industry to see the scheme work in a future form. As has been said, demand was definitely there. More than 210,000 applications had been made to the scheme by the time of its closure, and I think there would have been even more if the application process had been easier.

There were certainly problems with the design of the scheme, but the overwhelming enthusiasm with which it was met by householders is very striking. That willingness to pay for home efficiency improvements, if it could be encouraged with some financial help in conjunction with Government schemes, should not be squandered now. We should press on.

Those in attendance at that meeting felt that ending the scheme after just six months of operation suggested an inconsistent approach to energy efficiency and a lack

of faith in Government policy. In fact, the owner-occupied market may now be disincentivised as a result, which is why it is even more important that, as well as looking back to learn, we quickly move on and address people's willingness to take this up.

It is absolutely critical that we act fast. Whatever comes next, we must, as a minimum, include the following. First, as has been said, the scheme must last a minimum of 10 years, to allow industry to develop the necessary skills, provide investor confidence and meet objectives over a sustained period. Those skills could be built up and delivered by local colleges such as mine, which would love to be part of the green jobs revolution that this could bring about. If the Government committed to a 10-year grant programme of home insulation and renewable energy improvements, suppliers could expand to meet that demand, knowing that there was time to invest.

Secondly, a future scheme must cover all homes. As well as social housing, the Government must support owner-occupied homes and private landlords in the energy efficiency transition. That will require the Government to implement and co-ordinate a range of concurrent schemes to suit the different markets. The Government must think big on this.

Thirdly, the scheme must be easy to access for my and all our constituents across the country. People are willing to access it, but they will put off by any barriers put in their way. If it is really difficult to access, the scheme will fail. It must be easy to access.

Fourthly, a future scheme must expand the accredited supplier base. Inviting a small number of companies to deliver the grant was a mistake, as they were overwhelmed by demand at a time when the number of people wanting to do DIY on their homes increased massively during lockdown. The British Board of Agrément accreditation service provides quality assurance for all the relevant building sectors: insulation, wall cladding, floors, heating, ventilation, walls and doors and roofing. All of those accredited suppliers need to be able to participate in the scheme.

Fifthly, a new cohort of inspectors must be created and trained. This was a limiting factor in the previous scheme. Grenfell sadly demonstrated just how dangerously unregulated the building industry has become. Creating a new body of locally based and easily accessible inspectors, who would also inspect the delivery of grant scheme installations, would provide the dual benefit of building safety and fraud avoidance.

Finally, it is vital that the Government work with the building industry right from the start of the scheme's creation. They did not do that last time. It has been suggested that they could easily work with the industry through the Construction Leadership Council. They must also work with financial services, including mortgage companies, to ensure that the system is deliverable. This must include providing financial incentives to homeowners, for without the grant, decarbonising a home is very expensive. Some of my constituents in Putney received quotes, as required by the scheme, of up to £20,000 to properly decarbonise their home. Financial support needs to be made available to deliver that, and more financial support needs to be made available to people on low incomes. That could involve grants or personal tax relief, although that would not incentivise all households.

[*Fleur Anderson*]

We need to invest in public engagement to raise consumer awareness of the additional benefit of reducing heating bills.

I would like the Minister's assurance that he will listen to the voices of the building industry, environmental groups and potential consumers—householders, leaseholders, landlords and local authorities—when designing whatever scheme comes next. We were all desperate for the green homes grant scheme to succeed and were desperately disappointed at its closure. We simply will not achieve net zero without green homes. COP26 will provide the perfect opportunity to announce a viable, long-term approach to reducing greenhouse gas emissions from homes. The Government must not miss this opportunity.

4.5 pm

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): We have had an excellent debate, with a very high degree of agreement among those taking part, not only about the failings of this particular scheme but about the imperative at the heart of what we have been talking about this afternoon. That is the imperative of ensuring that, within a very short time, we have secured in this country a massive uplift in the energy efficiency of homes across all sectors of housing—not just the easy-to-treat homes but the ones that have single cavity walls, for example, and are difficult to treat. We have to put into those homes different forms of heating to go along with the energy efficiency uprating, and the reason we have to do that is of course to decrease very substantially the emissions from buildings, which contribute so substantially to CO₂ emissions overall, which could lead us well away from our target of net zero by 2050. Indeed, buildings in the UK emit some 19% of emissions overall, and the vast majority of that is in residential homes, so the targeting of schemes to uprate energy efficiency in homes is vital.

The Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee, the right hon. Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne), made an excellent contribution. By the way, I congratulate his Committee on its hard work in looking forensically not just at this particular scheme, but at the things we need to do to get to where we want to go on home insulation. He mentioned the figure of 13.6 million homes—not new homes but homes of all kinds. As he said, all homes have different requirements when it comes to their retrofit. There are 13.6 million homes that will basically need work to be done on them over the next nine years. He estimated that that equates to about 1.5 million properties a year over the next nine years.

Although I welcomed the Treasury's initial announcement in summer 2020 that what looked like a substantial amount of money would be made available for retrofitting homes, we have to understand that, even at that point, it was substantially less than the sum required to meet the ambition set out in the energy White Paper to make all homes EPC conform to EPC band C. I fully accept the Environmental Audit Committee Chair's strictures about the use and accuracy of EPCs. Nevertheless, the ambition is that all properties should be band C or above by 2035. That date, I think, should come further forward, but that is the area that we are looking at.

The idea that we could make some reasonably rapid initial progress with a scheme in the private sector involving vouchers was a welcome start. I think that the only lesson or conclusion that we can draw from the allocation of this particular fund, the particular way it was done and the subsequent requirement placed on BEIS to draw up a scheme is that we should never do it in this way again, as far as our targets are concerned. Perhaps there is a lesson from what has happened over the last few months.

I am interested to hear from the Minister about this. My understanding of how the scheme progressed is that the Treasury, without any idea of what was involved in the process, announced that money would be made available—£1.5 billion, with £500 million for the local authority delivery scheme—with about as much detail as I have set out this afternoon. The Treasury then said to BEIS, “Go away and work up a scheme to make it happen, and we want it on the ground as quickly as possible.” Had I been a fly on the wall during those discussions, I would have hoped to see BEIS kicking back at the Treasury and saying, “Look, this is ludicrous. You can't do it this way. You can't expect a scheme to be worked up in this way. And, by the way, you can't expect a scheme to be conceived, put into operation, undertaken and closed within a year. You just can't do it that way.” That is what BEIS should have said to the Treasury. Instead, it rapidly produced a scheme and, in so doing, undertook the services of a consultancy company based in America which had no experience of these sorts of operations.

Frankly, the scheme was doomed not to work from the start. Indeed, that is what happened. The final figures, which came out in May, show the frankly pathetic number of measures that arose from the scheme. We also heard, while we ran through that period, dreadful stories of building companies that had geared themselves up to do the work but did not get paid for it. There were immeasurable layers of bureaucracy involved in getting voucher schemes going, even though many householders desperately wanted to take advantage of them.

I have the figures from the end of February, which were released before the final figures were made available. At that point—the scheme was still going but it was nearing its end—123,000 vouchers had been applied for, but only 28,000 had been issued. What was the company running this organisation doing by working out the scheme in such a way? There were only 5,800 installations at that point, and of those, only 900 or so were for low carbon measures. This scheme was not just a pathetic failure; it has put the cause of retrofitting homes back substantially. Companies that wanted to do the work were burned yet again and will perhaps be reluctant to undertake further work. Disappointed householders were grievously misled on the energy uprating process, and precious time has been lost for getting to grips with this. To say, “This is a lesson learned in how not to do it,” is a bit of an understatement.

I hope that the considerations raised by every contributor this afternoon will be at the heart of the lessons that the Department will take on board for future projects on energy efficiency uprating. The scheme has to be serious. It has to have the right amount of money to make a difference. The timescale has to be long enough for people to be able to do the work properly and have confidence in the system, and for the variety of necessary

measures to be put in place, including, as the Chair of the EAC said, measures that suit the different circumstances of each household and the time required to get the work done.

We also ought to take lessons from the element of the scheme that had some purchase—namely, the local authority part, which has been a relative success. Although it made local authorities adhere to breakneck timescales, they were nevertheless often able to deliver because they were not an American consultancy firm trying to do things by numbers overseas. Rather, they were on the ground with their local communities, engaged in the work. That is another lesson that we ought to draw from this fiasco—give it to local agencies that can actually do the work properly on the ground and make it happen on a daily basis, rather than run it remotely from the centre.

We can draw some valuable lessons from this fiasco. I am tempted to say that it is such a dreadful catastrophe for the cause of energy efficiency activity that, in the words of Stanley Holloway,

“someone’s got to be summonsed!”

It is a shocking failure of Government.

I hope that the lessons will have been at least partly learned by the time the heat in buildings strategy comes out, which, as hon. Members have mentioned, has been delayed on several occasions. I should not say this as a shadow Minister—it should be for the Minister to say this—but I am confident that it will come out shortly. I hope that the Minister will be able to tell us that it will come out in the next few days or weeks and that it will contain a number of the lessons mentioned this afternoon for bringing forward the ambition of energy efficiency.

All of that is contained in the energy White Paper. I hope that the heat in buildings strategy will address itself to the width and depth of the task in front of us. We know that that we have not appreciated the scale of the task, but I hope that the strategy will, finally, address what we actually need to do to achieve our energy efficiency targets.

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): We need to leave a couple of minutes for Mr Dunne to wind up at the end. We now go to the Minister, Paul Scully.

4.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. Rest assured that my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne) will have plenty more than two minutes to summarise the debate. I congratulate my right hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) on securing this debate on the future of the green homes grant scheme, which has been conducted in a conducive way despite concerns about the scheme.

It is really important that as we discuss the future of the green homes grant scheme, we also discuss the wider future of decarbonising our country’s 30 million buildings to meet our target of net zero carbon emissions by 2050. As hon. Members know, the Government’s aim is to reduce emissions by 78% from 1990 levels, which is one of the most ambitious targets in the world and is supported by our sixth carbon budget, which limits the

volume of greenhouse gases emitted over a five-year period from 2033 to 2037, taking the UK more than three quarters of the way towards reaching net zero by 2050.

The carbon budget will ensure that Britain remains on track to end its contribution to climate change while remaining consistent with the Paris agreement temperature goal to limit global warming to well below 2° C and pursue efforts towards 1.5° C. In the energy White Paper, as has been mentioned, we set out our ambition and approach to get as many homes as possible to energy performance certificate band C by 2035, which includes our aim to deploy 600,000 heat pumps a year by 2028. We need far more households to heat their homes without burning fossil fuels such as oil and gas.

My right hon. Friend talked about the EPC, which is a widely available, standardised means of assessing sustainability. We will not be getting rid of the EPC, but none the less we will continue to make improvements to its accuracy, as outlined in the action plan as a result of the consultation we have undertaken.

Other ways and means of tackling climate change are outlined in the Prime Minister’s 10-point plan for a green industrial revolution, which sets out how we will mobilise £12 billion of Government investment, and potentially three times as much from the private sector, by 2030. That will level up regions across the UK and support up to 90,000 highly skilled green jobs across the UK in this Parliament, and up to 250,000 by 2030. The UK is committed to taking advantage of the huge economic opportunities that the transition to a green economy offers, including large-scale job creation and even more jobs being supported in the green economy.

In addition, as we have heard, 2021 is one of the most important years for global Britain as we host the G7 presidency and the UN climate change conference, COP26, in Glasgow in November. We know that the world is watching as we lead the way in reducing carbon emissions from homes, businesses and public sector buildings.

I welcome the news from my hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (David Johnston) about his pre-COP26 conference in his constituency. It is excellent that as well as doing the countrywide conference that brings global attention to the UK, and Glasgow in particular, we all do our bit as champions within our constituencies. I congratulate him on that.

We are making excellent progress across much of that investment; substantial sums have already been spent on schools, hospitals and social housing as well as in privately owned or rented homes, particularly in partnership with local authorities. Just one part of that is the green homes grant voucher scheme, which was launched to help householders offset the cost of installing energy efficiency measures in their homes. Despite the fact that the scheme received many applications, as we heard, it did not deliver at the rate and scale that we originally hoped. As a result of that, and because the Government remain committed to reaching our ambitious goals by 2050, we had to look again at how best to support householders in decarbonising their homes at a rapid pace. We took stock and considered our approach. We reviewed our options and made a decision to close the voucher scheme, which ceased taking new applications at 5pm on 31 March.

As we have heard, the Government have already issued more than 62,000 vouchers, worth more than £262 million,

[*Paul Scully*]

and we continue to process more each and every day. No one who made a valid application by that closing date will miss out, but clearly, as we have heard, that does not mean that our work is finished. We are now refocusing our efforts and substantial funding on alternative approaches.

The Government will of course reflect on the lessons learnt from the closure of the green homes grant voucher scheme. In response to the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson), we will learn those lessons, but our ambition is not diminished and we will very much listen to everyone who will be involved with us in the collective drive towards net zero, especially on decarbonising homes, which is so important. Other elements of the work on decarbonising homes have seen great successes. The local authority delivery element of the green homes grant scheme, for example, aims to support measures such as insulation and low-carbon heating. Of around 50,000 low-income households, both privately owned and rented, it is important, as we have heard, to make sure that we can address and support the people who cannot otherwise go about this very easily.

To date, the scheme has allocated £500 million of funding across the English regions. That investment is already being felt in constituencies across the country. For example, Bristol City Council has been awarded £2.6 million to retrofit 275 homes, reducing energy bills and creating warmer homes for low-income households. That project plans to install solar and solar thermal panels and underfloor insulation to keep residents warm through the winter months. The scheme, alongside the social housing decarbonisation fund, has now seen the Government commit an additional £300 million to green homes upgrades. The hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley) talked about “only” £300 million, but we cannot dismiss telephone number figures of investment. I think that in most contexts many people in this country would look askance at “only” alongside £300 million.

Such investment means that for the financial year 2021-22 we are investing more than £1.3 billion for energy efficiency and low-carbon heating up and down the country. That not only ensures that we continue to cut carbon, but supports tens of thousands of jobs across the country and reduces heating costs for those most in need, helping to build back greener and level up in one go.

I was pleased to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker) about the work that he is doing on sustainable materials. Yes, we can decarbonise homes and have retrofitting, but it is important that we plan for the future. We are embedding new practices with new materials, or newly purposed materials, because wood is hardly a new material, but it is very sustainable if we get it right. My hon. Friend's contribution is important to our thinking and to our drive to net zero, so I thank him and congratulate him on his work.

As the world looks to recover from the impact of coronavirus on our livelihoods and our economy, we have the chance to build back better and invest in making the UK a global leader in green technologies. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow once again for securing this debate. I appreciate all the comments that have been made, and we are listening.

My colleagues, the Energy Minister and other Government Members, will reflect on the words said today as we redouble our efforts to make sure, as I have said, that we keep to our ambition as we drive to net zero by 2050.

4.28 pm

Philip Dunne [V]: I want to start by thanking the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), for his wind-up speech and for undertaking to listen to the contributions in this debate, and indeed to the submissions made by the Committee that I am proud to chair. Before I respond to the points made, I also want to thank others who have participated, particularly the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), the Chair of the BEIS Select Committee, who co-sponsored this afternoon's debate with me. We work closely together on climate change issues, and it was good to see his characteristically measured and impressive contribution to the debate. We look forward with great interest to the results of the inquiry that is being undertaken into energy efficiency measures.

I also want to thank other Members who participated in the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (David Johnston) made an impassioned plea for contractors in his constituency. Notably, he called for future measures to help those who are fuel-poor, as did the hon. Members for Putney (Fleur Anderson) and for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley).

In the debate, although we were talking about an issue that is, let us face it, not the Government's finest hour in implementing a new support scheme, it was particularly striking that there was not a great deal of party point-scoring. The measured tone of the debate was about learning lessons to ensure that in future, whatever scheme is put in place to replace the green homes grant scheme, it is effective and can deliver on what is, frankly, and clearly from this debate, a very shared objective. In that respect, the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead), who speaks for the Opposition, was characteristically measured in his tone, too, for which I am very grateful.

On contributions, I cannot wind up without thanking for his comments my good friend, my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker), who plays such a valuable role on my Committee. He focused much of his remarks on ensuring that, when we look at energy efficiency measures, we give due credit to the embodied carbon impact of the materials used. He makes a very good point: we cannot just carry on using materials that in themselves create enormous carbon cost in their production. That is why he was persuasive in encouraging our Committee to undertake a new inquiry, which we have just launched, into the sustainability of the built environment, looking in particular at construction materials, in which he has such an interest.

To conclude, I encourage the Minister, in his discussions in the Department and with the industry, to ensure that we do not seek just to introduce headline-grabbing measures. This week there has been a rumour that the Government are thinking about scrapping gas boilers, introducing an end date for their installation. That would be as striking for domestic buildings as the ban on internal combustion engines in the sale of new petrol and diesel cars from 2030 will be for that industry.

There is a major difference, however: the motor vehicle industry has been working on alternative-fuel vehicles for many years and has hundreds—literally, I think, this

year 100—of new models coming into its showrooms, for people to start buying now. We are not in that position in domestic heating. In 2019, the last year for which figures are available, 1.7 million gas boilers were installed in our homes. In the same year, 30,000 heat pumps were installed. That is 56 times as many gas boilers as heat pumps.

As we have discussed, just installing a heat pump will not cause a home to qualify for a higher energy performance certificate band. The technology is there, but what is not there yet is what will be required for a new scheme: it should only be introduced, in my view, when the technology is available and affordable and when it is achievable to replace such a significant part of the construction industry's standard operating practice with something that can be installed because enough people are skilled to do so.

These measures are not simple. A great deal of thought is needed for their introduction, and work with the industry to ensure that any successor scheme to the green homes grant has a real prospect of restoring confidence to the industry and to consumers, so that it can be adopted. I very much look forward to what the heat and buildings strategy will say, and to the spending review this autumn.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the future of the Green Homes Grant voucher scheme.

4.34 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 27 May 2021

CABINET OFFICE

Empowering British Citizens Overseas to Participate in our Democracy

The Minister for the Constitution and Devolution (Chloe Smith): As we move to the new chapter in our nation's history and embrace the global opportunities it presents, we must ensure that the voices of our citizens across the world are heard. As committed to in the Government's 2019 manifesto, we will be bringing forward measures in the upcoming Elections Bill to scrap the arbitrary 15-year limit on the voting rights of British expatriates and make it easier for more British citizens living overseas to vote in UK parliamentary elections.

Delivering votes for life

In an increasingly global and connected world, modern technology and accessible air travel have strengthened the ability of our expatriates to retain deep ties to the United Kingdom. Many still have family here, a lifetime of hard work in the UK behind them and some will have even fought for our country. What is more, decisions made in the UK Parliament on foreign policy, defence, immigration, pensions and trade deals directly affect British citizens who live overseas. It is therefore right that they have a say in general elections and are well supported to do so.

Currently, to register as an overseas elector, British citizens need to have been registered to vote in UK parliamentary elections in the UK within the last 15 years. This arbitrary and anachronistic time limit will be removed in changes to be brought forward in the Elections Bill, enabling British citizens who were previously registered or resident in the UK to vote in UK parliamentary elections, no matter how long ago they left.

Being previously registered to vote or having previous residence in the UK denotes a strong degree of connection to the UK and so this extension of voting rights sets a sensible boundary for the overseas franchise while maintaining consistency with the existing system.

Improving participation for British citizens living overseas

The registration period for overseas electors will be extended from one year to up to three years and changes will be made to enable electors to reapply or refresh their absent vote arrangements (as appropriate) at the same time as renewing their registration. This will make it easier for them to remain on the register with an absent vote arrangement in place ahead of elections.

Improvements will also be made to the registration process. Changes to the current identity verification processes for overseas electors will bring this part of the registration process in line with the process for domestic electors and make it easier for overseas electors to have their identity verified. We will also put in place clear rules regarding the address under which an overseas elector may register, ensuring that the individual continues to have a demonstrable connection to a UK address. This will also have the advantage of maximising continuity with the existing registration system, which electors and administrators are familiar with.

Together, these changes will help to ensure that overseas electors are able to participate in our democracy and provide extra assurance for them to have an appropriate absent vote arrangement in place ahead of elections.

Ensuring British citizens can have their say

The Government's Elections Bill will place British citizens' participation at the heart of our democracy, and its broad range of measures give voters the confidence to have their say in a truly global Britain—no matter how, or where, they choose to cast their votes.

In addition to opening our democracy to British citizens living overseas, the Elections Bill will also: improve access to voting for electors with disabilities; tackle electoral fraud by post, proxy, in polling stations or through intimidation and undue influence; prevent foreign interference by hostile actors; and increase transparency and accountability within our elections.

[HCWS62]

DEFENCE

Service Complaints Ombudsman 2020 Annual Report on Service Complaints System

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans (Leo Docherty): I am pleased to lay before Parliament today the service complaints ombudsman's annual report for 2020 on the fairness, effectiveness and efficiency of the service complaints system.

This report is published by Mariette Hughes—her first as Ombudsman—and covers the fifth year of operation of the reformed service complaints system and the work of her office in 2020.

The findings of the report will now be considered fully by the Ministry of Defence, and a formal response to the ombudsman will follow once that work is complete.

[HCWS60]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Bovine TB

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): I am updating the House on today's publication of the Government's response to a consultation and call for views on a range of proposals to help eradicate bovine tuberculosis (bTB) in England by 2038. This is a step towards some of the key priorities that this Government set out in response to Charles Godfrey's independent review of our bTB eradication strategy in March 2020.

bTB is one of the most difficult and intractable animal health challenges that England faces today. In the last year, over 27,000 cattle in England were compulsorily slaughtered to tackle the disease. This causes devastation and distress for hard-working farmers and rural communities and is damaging our reputation as world leaders in high standards of animal health and welfare. Tackling bTB in England is costing taxpayers over £100 million each year.

The bTB eradication strategy, published in 2014, is making progress, with sustained reductions in the number of new cases and proportion of cattle affected by the

disease in the highest incidence areas. However, to achieve bTB-free status for England by 2038, we need to build on this momentum.

The consultation focused on proposals to transition away from the current badger control policy and improve diagnostic testing to root out bTB more effectively. Badger culling is one of the most contentious and divisive policies within our bTB eradication strategy and our latest consultation has continued to attract scrutiny.

We should continue to proceed with the transition to non-lethal wildlife controls as set out in the consultation and striking a timely balance for this transition will be crucial. Current policy enables four years of intensive culling in defined areas, with scope for a further five years of supplementary culling. I intend to stop issuing intensive cull licences for new areas post 2022 and enable any new licences issued from 2021 to be cut short if the chief veterinary officer considers this acceptable based on the evidence available at the time. Supplementary cull licences will be limited to two years and no further such licences will be issued in any areas in which supplementary culling has previously been licensed. We will develop a monitoring system to track the badger population and disease in badgers in former culling areas to monitor any trends. This data will be published, thus supporting any future decision making.

The consultation also put forward proposals for targeted changes to our cattle testing policy to ensure we root out the disease in herds with sustained problems, while further helping to protect low risk bTB areas. I am committed to introducing these policy changes as soon as is practicable. The parallel call for views included longer term options for further changes and improvements to bTB testing, supporting responsible cattle movements and rewarding low-risk cattle purchasing behaviour. It also discussed ways we can continue to adapt how we pay compensation or indeed, reward farmers for “best practice”. We are considering the evidence submitted through consultation responses to determine next steps.

I am committed to accelerating work to deliver a deployable cattle vaccine by 2025. This will be a powerful additional tool in the fight against bTB and will support the staged transition away from culling in ways which will help to protect gains made and ensure incremental progress continues to be made towards disease eradication. Field trials are expected to commence in June.

There is no single solution to the scourge of bTB and we must continue to deploy a range of policy interventions. New industry initiatives, such as the CHECS TB entry-level membership, have launched. The successor to the TB advisory service will also provide the practical help many herd owners need.

Working together, I have full confidence that we can continue to turn the tide on this terrible disease and achieve our long-term objective of eradicating it in England by 2038.

[HCWS59]

TRANSPORT

Draft Merchant Shipping (Prevention of Air Pollution from Ships) (Amendment) Regulations 2021

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts): I have today published as a draft the Merchant Shipping (Prevention of Air Pollution from

Ships) (Amendment) Regulations 2021 and an accompanying draft explanatory memorandum. The draft regulations amend the Merchant Shipping (Prevention of Air Pollution from Ships) Regulations 2008 (SI 2008/2924) to implement international air pollution standards—agreed by the International Maritime Organization (IMO)—for the control of pollutant air emissions from ships.

The draft regulations implement several air quality measures to control sulphur and nitrogen oxide (SO_x and NO_x) emissions from ships. These are contained in annex VI of the international convention for the prevention of pollution from ships (MARPOL). The measures are already in force for shipping internationally, but the measures must also be incorporated into our domestic legislation to enable them to be enforced effectively. Most notably, to discourage non-compliance by foreign flagged vessels in UK waters, which would be detrimental to public health and the environment in UK coastal areas.

The draft regulations apply the global 0.5% sulphur limit on marine fuel used by UK flagged ships operating outside European waters and prohibit ships from carrying high sulphur fuel in their fuel tanks to help compliance in international waters. They also apply the stricter NO_x tier III limit on new ships operating in “the North Sea Emission Control Area”

(including the English channel) which came into force internationally this year. The draft regulations also enable certain revisions to MARPOL annex VI to be implemented more rapidly using the ambulatory reference power in section 306A of the Merchant Shipping Act 1995.

The draft regulations are being published 28 days before they are due to be laid for approval by each House of Parliament. This is required under paragraph 14 of schedule 8 to the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 because part of the text in the 2008 regulations which the draft regulations amend includes amendments previously made under section 2(2) of the European Communities Act 1972. The amendments to the 2008 regulations which were introduced under the European Communities Act were made by the Merchant Shipping (Prevention of Air Pollution from Ships) (Amendment) Regulations 2010 (SI 2010/895) and the Merchant Shipping (Prevention of Air Pollution from Ships) and Motor Fuel (Composition and Content) (Amendment) Regulations 2014 (SI 2014/3076). Further details are contained in the annex to the draft explanatory memorandum.

The draft regulations complement the Government’s ambition to tackle all sources of air pollution, making our air healthier to breathe, protecting nature and boosting the economy as set out in the clean air strategy 2019. In July 2019, the Government published the “Clean Maritime Plan” to address both air quality pollutants and greenhouse gas emissions from shipping. The plan sets out an ambitious path to the transition to zero emission shipping supporting the achievement of the legislative target for the UK to reach net zero emissions across the economy by 2050. The plan outlines the Government’s ambitions that by 2025 all new vessels for use in UK waters are being designed with zero emissions capabilities, and that by 2035 zero emission marine fuel infrastructure (bunkering) is widely available across the UK.

The draft regulations, the accompanying draft explanatory memorandum and the impact assessment can be found on gov.uk.

[HCWS61]

Petitions

Thursday 27 May 2021

PRESENTED PETITION

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Independent assessment in family courts

Petition of a resident of the United Kingdom

To the House of Commons.

The petitioner Aaliyah Spence, the mother of three children who lives in England,

Declares that two of her children have bradykinin-mediated angioedema. This is a disease where the children appear to have blemishes just like bruises.

Further declares that this was first noticed when she took one of her children for medical attention. Further declares that much like the case of Sabrina Dietsch and Yoan Bombarde in France her children were then taken into care. Notes, however, that whereas in France the children were returned to their parents, in England, it is very difficult to obtain independent assessment that enables the review of her case and therefore her children remain in care. Further declares that, even though the blemishes that were thought to be bruises continued to appear whilst the children are in foster care, the local authority continues to be set on keeping control of the children. Notes that this is not in the long term interests of the children.

The petitioner therefore requests that the House of Commons refers the issue of the lack of independent assessment of expert reports in the family courts to the Justice and Education select committees for review.

And the petitioner remains, etc.

[P002668]

OBSERVATIONS

TREASURY

Support for market traders

The petition of residents of the constituency of Coventry South,

Declares that Coventry Market is one of Britain's best city markets but it has been adversely affected by the COVID-19 outbreak; and further declares that the Government has not provided adequate financial support for the hardworking Coventry Market Traders and other small traders during lockdown and other times of restrictions.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to bring forward measures to support Coventry Market Traders and similar small businesses.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Zarah Sultana, *Official Report*, 10 February 2021; Vol. 689, c. 430.]

[P002649]

Observations from the Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman):

The Government thank the hon. Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana) for submitting the petition on behalf of her constituents about further measures to support Coventry Market Traders and similar smaller businesses during lockdown and other times of restrictions.

Throughout the pandemic the Government have sought to protect people's jobs and livelihoods while also supporting businesses across the UK. To do this, the Government have put in place an economic package of measures which will provide businesses with certainty over the coming months even as measures to prevent further spread of the virus ease. To date, the Government have provided a total of £352 billion in support since the start of the pandemic.

The Chancellor announced further measures at the recent Budget to businesses on top of our previous economic responses. This includes a new Restart grant of up to £18,000 to over 680,000 business premises, giving them the cash certainty they need to plan ahead and safely relaunch trading over the coming months. Market and sales kiosk are eligible for the Restart grants of up to £6,000 and Coventry has already received £13.6 million in Restart grants.

Local authorities will also receive an additional £425 million of discretionary business grant funding on top of the £1.6 billion already allocated to allow them to support their local businesses, including market traders.

In order to support businesses and protect jobs, the Chancellor has extended both the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) and the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS) until September 2021. Since the inception of the CJRS, the scheme has helped to pay the wages of 57,000 jobs in Coventry and 28,100 self-employed individuals in Coventry have claimed SEISS grants.

Businesses have also received billions in loans, tax deferrals, business rate reliefs, and general and sector-specific grants.

Thanks to the people's hard work and sacrifice, supported by the success of the initial stages of the vaccine roll-out, there is now a path to reopening the economy. The Government will continue to take a flexible but cautious approach as we review restrictions, ensuring measures reflect the easing of restrictions will enable businesses to bounce back as quickly as possible.

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